

Also by razia

deeper

*hoping this light will guide you home
oh, I hope someday I'll make it out of here
there's an ocean inside me (it rages for you) series*

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Summary: Rejection has a way of sticking with you, and Zagreus has reached his limit.

(Or: Zagreus leaves and Hypnos realizes there's not much left for him in the House of Hades.)

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Home is
where you
are wanted

razia

CHAPTER 1

‘Do not visit me again.”

The words ring around his head, echoing and repeating until they become nothing but white noise.

If Zagreus could erase them from his mind, he would. Not as disobedience, no. Just so he wouldn't have to remember his own mother telling him to go and never come back. For his safety, she said. For her own, too.

Selfish, is the accusation that crosses his mind as he regains conscience. He opens his eyes to a sea of blood as black as tar in the dim light. The pool seems to hold him down for a moment, blood so thick it resists every motion, but soon he's finding the stone under his feet and climbing up the steps. His limbs feel heavy with a kind of exhaustion that doesn't go away even once free of the pool.

An exhaustion he's very familiar with.



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He doesn't bother shaking the blood off and just stands there, watching as it falls to the ground and fades out into nothingness. The liquid is fake, of course; not even his father would be so crass as to keep a pool of actual blood around the place, though Zagreus has never figured out why he would have a fake one in the first place.

Every time he asked such questions, he was met with 'you don't need to know these things', 'why don't you go bother one of your teachers?', and 'if only you were this interested in your studies'.

Hades has never encouraged curiosity.

Still, even though the blood is fake, some sort of magic Zagreus can't quite grasp, the smell itself is realistic enough to bother him. Some might find it funny that the alleged God of Blood doesn't like a recognizable aspect of his own domain, but Zagreus can't help the grimace every time the metallic smell fills his nose, leaving behind the taste of iron and something alive in his mouth.

Almost as if he devoured the creature, instead of merely killing it.

Perhaps it's only a matter of time until he gets used to it; to killing living things. Ares certainly makes it sound easy, pleasurable even. Like it's something to seek out rather than avoid. Zagreus doesn't feel like it's his place to judge, but he's also unwilling to reach that state of numbness. How long does he have before the lives he takes—even if they're rats and satyrs and nuisances in general—just stop registering as such? Will he start to enjoy it at some point?

The thought of killing the living creatures at the edge of the Underworld morphs into the thought of doing this again and

again and again. Get out of the pool, greet whoever's around, ignore his father on the main desk, go to his room, pick a weapon, slay monsters and champions and people that were so evil in life that they morphed into unrecognizable nightmares after death, reach the surface, look into his mother's eyes just to see the way she shifts her gaze away, as if pretending that he's not there might change anything.

Rinse, repeat.

Again.

Again.

Again and again and again.

Just the thought of doing this for hundreds of years is enough for Zagreus' heartbeat to spike, his breaths coming faster, his blood racing as if he's just finished a fight. Swallowing, he closes his eyes and does his best to rip himself away from those thoughts. Now is not the time, and this is one of the worst places for a panic attack. He can feel the weight of all the eyes on him, and like it or not, the shades will talk. Bad enough he can never get a moment's peace from any of the other gods in this place; even the shades have no qualms with getting up in his business.

To distract himself, he focuses on the feeling of his lungs expanding and shrinking for a moment, eyes staring blankly at some point on the floor.

It takes another minute after he calms down for him to realize he's been standing there this whole time, looking at the floor like a weirdo. Normally, he would've made a joke to the nearest shade about looking for ghost prints or something, while moving swiftly away to hide his embarrassment. This time, though, Zagreus can't find the energy to care. Lifting his

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gaze, he sees his father down the hall, giant desk impossible to miss. Hades isn't looking at him, but Zagreus knows his arrival has not gone unnoticed.

He forces himself to take a step, then another and another, until his feet automatically move him forward, so used to the path that he doesn't need to think about it anymore.

The warm yellow light of the fires hits a few shades mingling about, their green forms swaying gently in the air. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a few of them turn to him as he passes by. Quiet whispers too faint to make out fill his ears like white noise, adding to the cacophony of the House.

"Welcome to the House of Hades!" Hypnos' voice is loud and bubbly as Zagreus approaches, his golden eyes gleaming as he grins at Zagreus.

"Hey, Hypnos." The sound of his own voice surprises him a bit, mouth moving without his consent. He sounds steady enough, which is a relief.

"You died by"—Hypnos looks at his ledger—"by Natural Causes, again? Oh my, maybe you should just avoid whatever that is, next time!"

Zagreus would normally smile right now, offer something back, some little quip or a sincere thanks, but he can't muster the energy for it. He doesn't know what his face is doing, but he feels it must be blank as he answers, "Yeah, I... would love to do that, actually. But I think the natural causes like me too much."

It's the best he can come up with, and it falls flat on the ground at Hypnos' feet.

At this point, Hypnos usually smiles even if Zagreus was less than funny, in a show of his seemingly endless good spirits, telling him whatever other nonsense he thinks Zagreus may

want to hear. But this time he doesn't. Instead, his smile falls, almost disappearing completely, and Zagreus thinks he sees a flash of worry on his face before Hypnos wipes it away.

He feels the beginnings of guilt and shame rise up from his stomach to his throat. He's so out of it that even Hypnos has noticed. That doesn't bode well for his chances of hiding it from anyone else. Gods, he really can't do anything right.

Hypnos seems at a loss for words, so Zagreus dredges up a small, sincere smile for him and leaves him there, making a beeline for his room. He ignores his father and everyone else he passes... except for Nyx, because Zagreus is not rude, no matter what his father says.

"Child," she says to him as he passes by, voice smooth and controlled as always, that feeling of gentle darkness sweeping over him and cradling him gently. Nobody can make him feel quite as loved and treasured with a single word as she can. (Not even Persephone.)

He wishes he could appreciate the moment more, but he needs to hide before he starts losing himself to painful thoughts again.

"Nyx," he answers back, knowing he doesn't control his own voice as well. By the slight tilt of Nyx's head, he knows he fails at hiding the tremor in his voice and hands, but to his relief she doesn't question him on it. One of the things he loves most about her is that she knows when to leave it well alone. He appreciates it more than ever when she allows him to pass without stopping him.

The corridors are well-lit and tastefully decorated. He's especially proud of the result, since he's the one who's been paying for the renovations, but they still make him feel

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claustrophobic.

Sometimes, he swears they move, closing in on him like a giant hand.

It's not a new feeling. Zagreus has been dealing with it for as long as he can remember, always fighting away the feeling that the walls want to swallow him up, that the ceiling might fall at any moment and trap him under it. After being under an open blue sky, even though the time was brief, Zagreus can now compare the two clearly in his mind, and he longs for the freedom of the open air and humid earth under his feet.

He would even welcome the bitter cold that seems to cover everywhere but his mother's grove.

"Do not visit me again."

When he'd seen her last, her brows had been furrowed, lips twisted in worry. At first, he'd thought it worry for himself.

His hopes were destroyed when she demanded that he never return, trying to explain in that even voice of hers how much danger he had put them in.

At the time he'd been foolish and hopeful and worried for the mother he had just met, but now he could tell that the wrinkle in her brow had been mostly frustration, at him and the prospect of being called back to the Underworld. Maybe she didn't want her duties as mother and Queen. Maybe she didn't care as much as she said she did.

As for the worry, that had been for herself.

His brain, unbidden, runs over the differences between him and his mother; a train of thought that he can't help but have every time he's in her presence, or soon thereafter, when the memory of her is still fresh in his mind.

She's a mixture of bright, soft colors and appears delicate in

a way he never could, not with what he inherited from his father. While his skin is fair, Zagreus knows what he looks like, how his hair is so dark it almost absorbs the light from his surroundings. His clothes are blood red and smoke grey and bone white. His one green eye, the only real thing he has from his mother, looks completely out of place next to his red one.

They look so different, he and his parents. Almost as if... almost as if he wasn't meant to be at all.

There's a half second where he thinks he might break down, but the tears dry before they even form. It's an old pain, this feeling of rejection and abandonment. He's usually able to manage it because he's lived with it for so long, but today it's excessively sharp, like talons squeezing his heart.

"Do not visit me again."

It's not that Zagreus isn't accustomed to rejection. During his childhood his father was never really present except to berate and belittle him, to remind him that he wouldn't amount to anything if he didn't handle his responsibilities, but also completely skipping in teaching his own son how to properly deal with things. And even when he'd thought Nyx was his birth mother, she'd begun to distance herself from him as he grew up.

He still remembers the day she asked him to call her *Nyx* instead of *mother*.

That request had hurt so much more than she probably realized, though Zagreus would never tell her that. Wanting to spare her the guilt, but also not wanting to bare his heart.

Deep down, he knows that part of him will never forgive her.

Unsurprisingly, he doesn't encounter anyone on the way to

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his room, since the shades aren't allowed inside the inner wings of the House. The silent halls are well-illuminated, walls lined with old portraits of old heroes and old paintings of old artists, all watching with frozen eyes as he makes his way to his room.

Once he steps inside, Zagreus is almost tempted to keep going directly to his courtyard, grab whatever weapon he feels like wielding next and simply lose himself in the throes of battle, the way he's so used to. He's done it so many times that he can almost completely shut off his brain and fall back on muscle memory instead of paying attention.

It's tempting. Numbing the pain with mindless work is nothing new to him.

"Do not visit me again."

This time, though... maybe he can lie down for a while. Just until the feeling of *run away run away run away* subsides.

He takes a long look in the mirror, ignoring how his clothes mark him clearly as belonging to the House, and then steps towards the bed.

Gods don't need sleep. It's one of the perks of divinity, being able to simply keep going forever with only brief intervals of rest here and there, the type of rest that consists of sitting down for twenty minutes.

But Zagreus learned long ago that sleep is a good escape, especially when he doesn't dream and can spend his time in immaterial darkness, mind mostly unaware of the passage of time.

In the secret corners of his mind, places no one would ever see, Zagreus often wonders if a dreamless sleep could be compared to death. He's wanted to ask Hypnos this question many times, but the thought of revealing his innermost feelings like that is terrifying. Besides, no one needs to know

how often Zagreus thinks of his own permanent demise.

(And maybe Zagreus doesn't want to see Hypnos' expression fall with concern, doesn't want to give him more to worry about when he's already plenty busy.)

Zagreus takes off everything except his pants and lies down, leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor as he pulls the covers over his head and wraps himself in a tight cocoon. He does this so rarely that he forgot how comforting it is to hide beneath the blankets and pretend the world can't touch him.

He closes his eyes and hopes for a dreamless sleep, long and quiet, and wonders if Sleep himself can hear his wish from down the hall, amidst chatting souls, a booming voice, and mortal wishes.



Many hours later, he wakes up feeling surprisingly rested. It isn't until after he's dressed and warming up with Skelly that Zagreus realizes he didn't dream at all.



He should've started his next run already, but Zagreus still feels like something is holding him even though he rested. It's as if heavy, intangible chains are pulling him down down down, keeping him locked in place. He can feel Skelly's gaze on him, curious but not judging. Zagreus is grateful that at least someone hasn't found him wanting (yet).

He dangles his feet over the edge of the cliff as he contemplates his next move, the rock rough and warm under

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him. Everything in the Underworld is warm—he thinks he might be sick of it. Tartarus stretches out in front of his eyes, green hues and orange light dominating the majority of the view, though he can see some colorful lights winking away in some far away corners. If he concentrates hard enough, he can almost hear the screams.

“Hey, boyo. Not gonna go rushing out the door today?”

Zagreus doesn't jump, but it's a close thing. Turning around, he sees Skelly standing a little ways away, watching him. He doesn't have much facial expression, seeing as he's basically all bones, but Zagreus has become really good at reading his tone of voice and identifying the glints in his eyes.

“Hmm, maybe later.”

“You're not tired, are you? Can gods get tired?”

Zagreus smiles, going for something sincere and bright, but fake; so, so fake. “We can, sometimes. But I'm just not in the mood right now.” Zagreus is absolutely exhausted, actually, but not on a physical level. That would be much easier to deal with.

There's a pause, as if Skelly is seeing through his lie, but he doesn't call Zagreus out on it. “Hmm, then I guess you should go and rest! Should be at your full potential when you jump down there, huh?”

And with that, he turns away, leaving Zagreus alone to watch the way Tartarus twists and distorts in the distance.



It's hard to say how long he stays there. It's hard to say how long it's been since his last escape, actually. Time is inconsequential for a being like him, his perception altered by

the fact that time can barely touch his life.

Life, he scoffs mentally. *This isn't life. I'm not living. I'm just... here.*

The weight of it falls onto his shoulders all at once, the way things usually do, pressing him down into the dirt and stone as if to bury him forever. He hides his face in his knees, instead, and tells himself he's not going to cry.

It doesn't really work; the tears fall almost before he realizes they're there, sliding down his face, almost sizzling in the hot air as they roll down his cheeks. A sob threatens to escape, but he slaps a hand over his mouth and chokes it down.

I just don't wanna be here anymore.

Some thoughts have a way of burying themselves deep inside the mind, carving out their own little space bit by bit, taking root like a particular stubborn plant. It's far from the first time Zagreus has had thoughts like this, has felt like this. Each time, the feeling has been stronger, larger, taking up so much room in his chest that it feels like it's pressing down on his lungs and suffocating him with its intangible presence.

Things had gotten easier for a while, when he had found something to do, a goal to strive for. Something to keep his mind occupied, away from the dark places it likes to go.

And then Persephone had rejected him, told him never to return, forbidden him from seeing her again. What was the point of running around his father's realm and wreaking havoc, being almost torn in half, if the only thing awaiting him in the end was a mother that didn't want him and an unavoidable demise that seemed to relish in the way it sucked him under?

Pointless, that's what it is. The whole thing is pointless.

Just like me.

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He finds Thanatos in his usual place, leaning against the railing, watching Tartarus far below them.

Zagreus thinks twice before approaching, unsure of how to pose his question without raising any suspicion. He really doesn't feel like dealing with Thanatos' sour mood and cutting words right now, but he's here already, and he rarely sees Thanatos in the house at all. Achilles giving him a concerned look from his station spurns him on.

He moves forward automatically, eyes on the floor until he reaches his destination. He leans on the railing too, but his gaze is unfocused as he looks out.

"Zagreus," Thanatos says, voice toneless. He looks at Zagreus from the corner of his eyes, but Zagreus doesn't turn to face him like he always does.

"Hey, Than... can I ask you something?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Can you kill a god?"

He can only see Thanatos in his peripheral vision, but it's enough to catch how he flinches at the question, in shock.

"What kind of question is that?"

Zagreus takes a breath and holds it in a little bit longer than normal before he lets it out and turns to Thanatos with what he hopes is his usual smile. "What? It's a valid question! Haven't you ever wondered if you could kill a chthonic god? An Olympian? One of the lesser deities walking around?"

Thanatos crosses his arms and frowns at him. "Contrary to you, I have more to do than think about things like that."

"Humor me."

"Why do you want to know?"

"C'mon Than, even you must know what curiosity means."

"Yes, of course I know! Don't imply I can't be curious!"

Zagreus forces out a chuckle. "Sorry, sorry. But seriously, humor me, please. I've been going back and forth and can't decide, so I came to the source. You *are* death after all."

Thanatos sighs, closing his eyes as he gathers his patience. It's a familiar sight, though it cuts Zagreus deeply every time. It's just a simple question, even if he's asking it for not-so-simple reasons. Does he really have to act like it's so difficult to answer him?

"I... don't believe I could, no. I can only kill that which is mortal, so..." he shrugs. "If I were to try to kill a god, I suppose they would just regenerate, like you do."

"...I see. Makes sense, I guess. We wouldn't be gods if it was so easy to destroy us."

"Indeed. Are you done with the weird questions now?"

"Yup! Thanks, Than."

"Hm, you're welcome. I'm going back to work now." And he puffs away in green light, leaving Zagreus and his thoughts behind.

It's honestly the answer he expected, but disappointment still settles in his chest.

Maybe it's for the best. Zagreus is pretty sure Thanatos would have refused his wish, anyway. There's only one other person he can think of who may have a solution that they'd be willing to follow through with.

Waving to Achilles, Zagreus steps back into the main hall, mind so preoccupied with his thoughts and what he needs to

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do next that he almost misses the voice calling for him. Completely unlike what he's used to, the voice is tentative and quiet, so it takes him a few seconds to register that it belongs to Hypnos.

He turns to see Hypnos beckoning him forward, an uncertain smile on his face.

Curious, Zagreus approaches with a smile. "Hey mate, do you need something?"

"Ah, it's nothing really. I just, um, I-I was wondering if you had a good sleep?" There's a dark gold tint to Hypnos' cheeks that Zagreus can't remember ever seeing. "I know it was almost two days ago, but this is the first time I've seen you since, and I just wanted to know cause, you know, it's my responsibility to give people a good rest when I can, even to those who aren't mortal and—"

"Hypnos, breathe." Zagreus interrupts him, somewhat overwhelmed by the lack of pauses and the sheer volume of information.

Hypnos stops, the golden glow on his face getting stronger, and Zagreus has a moment of clarity. What he's seeing is Hypnos blushing.

"Ah, sorry, sorry, I got carried away. I wasn't sure if asking would weird you out, so I wanted to explain, though of course you haven't forgotten that I'm the God of Sleep, right, so I guess my explanation wasn't necessary—

"Okay, I'm gonna need you to breathe again, starting now." Zagreus interrupts again, feeling slightly guilty.

Hypnos stops again and takes a deep breath, but pauses afterwards without continuing, looking uncertain, blush still there.

Seeing this, Zagreus decides to have mercy and asks, "So, you made sure that I didn't dream?"

"Ah, yes! Most of the time I can feel wishes related to sleep and dreams, and I do my best to grant them when I can. It... usually works? Not always, though."

Zagreus blinks. "How could it not work? Isn't sleep your aspect? Doesn't that mean you control all of it?"

Hypnos looks surprised for a moment, and Zagreus wonders why before realizing he has never asked Hypnos how his powers work. Actually, he's almost never asked Hypnos any questions in general, let alone asking the other about himself. A stab of guilt pierces him, and he quickly shoves it away before it shows on his face.

"Well, I *could* control every facet of a person's sleep, but that wouldn't go over so well." Hypnos says hesitantly, fidgeting a bit in nervousness.

"Why's that?"

Hypnos rearranges the ledger in his hands, scratching his feather against a finger and leaving an ink mark there. "Well... sleep is intrinsically tied to the mind, so messing with it too much could put someone's mental wellbeing at risk. I'd be a very incompetent god if I did that on a regular basis, so I have to be careful. Putting someone to sleep needs to be more suggestion than command, unless I want to irreversibly scramble their mind."

"But... didn't you put the whole House to sleep that one time?"

"Oh, yeah, but that's different. It's okay if it happens sometimes, it just can't happen *every time*. Sleep commands in moderation, and all that. If it happened every time, that would

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be too much for anyone, especially mortals.”

“So... if you forced enough power into someone's mind, you could essentially drive them mad?” Zagreus asks nonchalantly, trying to pretend like his interest is purely curiosity. He's sure he succeeds. Mostly.

Even so, Hypnos still tilts his head at him, perhaps unsure why Zagreus has a sudden interest in this subject. “Ah, y-yeah, I guess? Or, if they're causing trouble, I could just make them sleep forever!” He smiles widely, spreading his hands. “That way they don't bother anyone, but also don't get hurt. That's the best conclusion to any serious conflict, right?”

Zagreus hides a wince at the path his thoughts are taking. “Yeah, you're right.”

“So, like I said, I don't directly command the mind to be dreamless, but I do suggest it. If the target isn't super tense or anxious, it usually works! I'm glad it worked for you.”

Hypnos' blush has gone down, but Zagreus feels warm all over, as if he's the one who's going to start blushing at any moment now. It's... comforting, to know that someone cares, that someone was listening in, even if it's just a part of their job.

I'm gonna miss you, Zagreus thinks, and it takes everything in him to keep from recoiling at the thought, to not let his face show what his mind decided to throw at him. He flexes his jaw and forces it to relax.

“Ah,” Hypnos looks to the side, where the queue to speak with Hades is getting bigger and bigger, “time to get back to work. I'll talk to you later!” He throws a last smile at Zagreus before returning to his duties, coaxing the shades into standing in line.

Zagreus tries to smile back at him, but he's not sure he

succeeds. He pivots towards his bedroom and walks away, distracted and discontented.



It takes him another two days (according to Hypnos—seriously, Hypnos is apparently the only person in the House who can reliably keep track of time, and that's such a simple but amazing power, Zagreus is in awe) to resume his escape attempts.

He still feels lethargic, pulled down by something that weighs on his heart and drags at his lungs, but the restlessness bites at his feet and bids him to run.

Zagreus is always running, but somehow he never gets anywhere.

Despite the restlessness, stepping onto the courtyard takes more effort than he expected. He picks up Varatha and Hypnos' purse, waves at Skelly, and throws himself through the portal as fast as he can, unwilling to let hesitation sink in. The pattern is familiar by now, so Zagreus allows himself to retreat into his mind and let muscle memory take over. After the first chamber is cleared, the only remaining sounds are the whispers of the shades and the flowing of the Styx. Taking a step towards the door, Zagreus hears the sudden discordant tone of a Chaos gate opening right in front of him.

Glancing down into the pit below, he admires the way the purple light almost seems at home amidst the green and orange so prevalent in Tartarus. Zagreus doesn't have the luxury of seeing much purple down here, though he can see where Nyx got her hues from.

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The not-smoke that permeates the gate dissipates before it can reach his face, but there's still a faint smell of... something. He can't put a name to it, wonders if it's something from the surface to which he has no access to. It beckons him closer, tempting him to take the leap, but Zagreus isn't sure he wants to see Chaos right now.

Thinking of Chaos reignites *those other thoughts* that try to drown him in guilt and uncertainty and sadness. After days of inactivity, he really just wants to move.

He steps around the gate and can't help but feel that someone is watching him. Maybe it's paranoia, maybe it's Chaos, maybe it's his own shadows and demons dogging his feet at every step. He wishes they were tangible, because then Zagreus would only have to turn around and thrust Varatha forward, catching them on the tip of the spear bathed in lightning, and leaving behind only charred remains.

Then again, maybe his demons would resurrect just like he does, coming back again and again to haunt him. Forever.

The word *forever* almost chokes him, even though the letters didn't even form in his mouth. He shakes his head to rid himself of such heavy thoughts and steps through the door.

Zagreus has no clear idea of how long he takes to finish a run. Each one feels like both achingly long hours and mere minutes, chambers and shades and rewards blending together in a horrific amalgamation of what his life has become. He's never bothered to count the seconds, at first too afraid to see how much time each attempt took, and then too focused on reaching his goal to care. Now, though, what he doesn't want to know is how much time he has before having to step into the House again.

It's funny how a place can change so much without anything changing.

Despite how his relationship with his father has always been bad, Zagreus never stopped calling the House his home. It used to bring good memories. There were the times he stayed in Nyx's domain alongside Thanatos and Hypnos, who were both older than him by some years, but all of them still young enough that playing together was fun.

Then Megaera and her sisters moved in, and even though Zagreus never had much contact with Tisiphone and Alecto, training with them at the training grounds was always a highlight of his monotonous childhood. (Even when he lost.)

The hours Achilles spent drilling into him every combat stance and battlefield strategy were a precious memory as well, even if Zagreus had been too young to remember most of it.

Even just mundane things, like watching the shades glide around or Cerberus chase down the occasional wretch that managed to sneak into the House, had been pleasant. He used to love sneaking into the garden, wondering where all the vegetation had come from. There were more things as well, some good and some mediocre, but all of it had been pleasant, at some point.

It's hard to pin down when that began to change, though Zagreus suspects it was just a matter of time until he grew up enough to start questioning some things. Getting no answer for his questions was absolutely half the catalyst that triggered his restlessness, and he imagines the other half might just be the type of person he is.

Too curious, some have said. *Nosy*, others criticize. *Never shuts up*, a complaint courtesy of his father.

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All true, probably.

Perhaps this was always his destiny. To question too much. To want more than what he's been given. Thanatos had said once, that Zagreus has no idea how good he has it. That may be true, but that doesn't change how empty he feels inside despite his many privileges. Doesn't change the fact that no matter how homely the House was at some point, now the main feeling it evokes in him is an urge to run, fast and far away.

Maybe trying to find his mother was more of an excuse than he would like to admit. Not that he wasn't happy he found her, of course he was glad he did, but a large part of his motivation was to get away from a place that felt more suffocating every time Zagreus stopped a second to look around and realized he had looked at the same walls and the same people for centuries.

He blinks back into the present, finding himself entering the chamber right before where Megaera's posted. Charon stands there the way he always does, staring into nothing, but Zagreus feels the other's eyes on him anyway. It's not a heavy stare, thankfully, and Zagreus' shoulders lose some of their tension.

He looks at the available boons, gleaming away, overpowering the centaur heart in the middle with their shine. Then he looks at the door waiting for him, promising darkness and a fight.

He turns his head just enough to catch a glimpse of the Styx to his right.

Hmmm.

"Say, Charon."

"Hohhhhh..." Charon says, still as a statue.

"If I jump into the Styx, it won't kill me, right?"

“Hahh...”

“Thought so. If I let the current drag me, will it take me to the House?”

“Guhhhh...”

Zagreus was *pretty* sure that was a confirmation. “I see. Thanks, mate.”

Then, Zagreus does something he's never done before. He jumps into the Styx.

As the waters close over his head, he hears Charon utter his version of a shout, hears the shuffle of clothing and flap of a cloak, but then he goes limp and lets himself get dragged away by the red waters, and he hears no more.

The trip by river is surprisingly long, the path longer and more meandering than it seems from the stones of Tartarus above. It just goes to show how lost in his thoughts he was, that he drifted through the whole first part of the journey without even noticing.

He sees the House in the distance and idly wonders how he's going to get in. He knows he usually ends up there somehow after dying, but isn't sure about the actual route or if he just appears indoors rather than traversing the river. Then, the Styx pulls him under with a force comparable to an Elysium champion, and Zagreus can do nothing but go along with it. The waters stir him down and to the left, until suddenly he's being thrust upward into the darkness.

As a god, he can hold his breath really well, but that doesn't mean it doesn't get uncomfortable. At some point, after holding his breath for long enough, his lungs inevitably fail, his heart stops and he dies, though he's not entirely sure how or why a god can die that way when they don't even need to

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breathe.

But this time, that doesn't happen. The Styx is fast and strong, and instead of his expected death by drowning, Zagreus breaks the surface of the pool as the current pushes him up and out. He takes a huge gulp of air, warm and smokey but still welcome.

A shade looks at him weirdly, but Zagreus pays them no mind.

With only his head above the water, he goes practically unnoticed by the people farther away as he takes a moment to look around.

As he predicted, he's in the main hall of the House of Hades, where he always wakes up after dying. Hypnos is manning the line, cheerful voice loud as it echoes across the hall, reaching the pool without distorting. His father, far down the hall, has his head down, writing furiously on a piece of paper that surprisingly hasn't caught fire yet. The yellow light that fills the place is almost welcoming after the long ride on the river of blood.

Then every thought settles back down as Zagreus remembers exactly why he doesn't like this place anymore.

With a quiet sigh, he climbs out of the pool and steps forward.

Hypnos meets his eyes over the heads of two small shades, and they smile at each other in greeting, though Hypnos' smile seems subdued. The two shades have moved on by the time Zagreus gets to him.

"Welcome to the House of Hades!" Hypnos says, looking down at his ledger, "and thanks for dy— huh?"

"What's wrong, mate?"

Hypnos' expression is that of puzzlement. "You... didn't die?"
Oops. "Er... no?"

A pair of golden eyes meet his over the ledger. Hypnos looks like he wants to ask. Then, his eyes dart to the pool and back again, and an hesitant look settles on his face.

"Ah, well..." he starts, voice low but slowly increasing to a normal level, Hypnos clearly trying to navigate the unexpected situation. "I'd say better luck next time, but if you didn't die, then nothing really bad happened, right?"

For a second, Zagreus thinks back on how weird he must be acting lately. He's always had strange thoughts and ideas, but rarely the will to put them in motion. The biggest uproar he's ever caused was his escape attempts, actually.

If Hypnos' reactions are anything to go by, Zagreus must be doing something beyond expectations and far beyond his expected behaviors. Well, aside from jumping into ancient rivers.

And isn't it sad, that Hypnos seems to be the only one to notice? Or maybe the only one who cares enough to say something. Either way, it's disappointing. Everything in this place is disappointing.

Ah, no, that's unfair. Zagreus knows other people care about him. It's just that maybe they don't care in the way he wants them to, with the intensity he wants them to, and that is just as saddening.

He smiles at Hypnos, suddenly grateful that the other didn't ask for details. "Yeah, nothing happened this time."

"I— I mean, you still failed to escape, but it's not like you haven't escaped before, so I'm sure you can do it again! You just have to, uhm, not die and not come back alive without escaping!"

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"I'll keep that in mind, Hypnos."

"Alright! Glad to help!"

Zagreus walks away without looking at anyone else, but he feels a heavy, golden gaze following him until he's out of sight.

Today is a day for him to be watched by a lot of unseen eyes, isn't it?



He goes ahead and starts another run after exchanging Varatha for Stygius, but keeping Hypnos' purse. (Not that he has been using it, but he hasn't been using any of the others either, so in the end it comes down to what he wants to carry. The jingling of coins, when he moves to knock a wretch into a wall, reminds him of who's waiting back at the House for him, while also providing some mildly entertaining background noise to the repetitive screams and groans of Tartarus.)

This time, when he enters the chamber right before Megaera's, Charon is facing him for once. There's no eyes for Zagreus to pinpoint the direction of his gaze, but he knows Charon's watching him.

"Hey Charon, thanks for the tip the other day. The trip was fun!"

Charon stays silent, but Zagreus doesn't feel any judgment from him. In fact, he even thinks he might actually be picking up on some... amusement? So he pauses a moment, pretending to evaluate the items on display... then grins at Charon and starts walking backward toward the edge of the stone. Charon turns his body in Zagreus' direction, as if to keep him in sight, but doesn't make any move to stop him. Zagreus sends him a

little wave as he jumps again.

No sounds of surprise follow him, but Zagreus still chuckles as he floats down the current.



He washes up on the stairs of the pool with a faint smile on his face, and Hypnos raises a brow at him before looking down at his ledger. When he finds what he's looking for and realizes Zagreus didn't die again, both eyebrows go up and Hypnos shoots him another glance.

Zagreus is in good spirits, so he grins at Hypnos as he passes by.

Hypnos hesitates for a second, but then he smiles back, waving cheerfully.

Zagreus gets to his room and goes right to the courtyard. Skelly shoots him a weird look as he walks past, but doesn't comment.



He loses count of how many times he repeats the process. Fight his way to the last chamber before Megaera's, say hello to Charon, hop into the Styx, let the waters haul him back. He takes a few breaks here and there, and the cycle becomes his new routine for a while.

At one point, when he takes a break after finding a bottle of ambrosia, he bumps into Megaera in the lounge, and she shoots him a nasty look.

"What do you think you're doing, Zag?" She asks, eyeing the bottle in his hand, but they both know that's not what she's

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asking about.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Meg. I do a lot of things; you're gonna have to be more specific."

She's drinking something weirdly green, gripping the cup in her hand tightly. "You know exactly what. Do you think I have the time to stand around waiting for you to show up at your leisure? When was the last time we fought?"

"I'm not sure. It's hard to keep track of time down here, you see."

Megaera is completely unimpressed, but Zagreus has dealt with her for so long that her foul mood doesn't really affect him. Not anymore. (He learned not to let it affect him.)

"I know you're making your way through Tartarus, I hear the shades talking about your presence down there. And yet, you're always back at the house without ever passing through me."

Zagreus smiles at her. "I've just been more careless lately. Why, are you worried about me?"

She scoffs. "As if. I'm worried about my work accumulating while I wait to do my babysitter duty."

"Hm, I don't plan on going past you for a good while. You can take a break."

"And let Lord Hades flay me alive when he finds out you passed through an empty chamber? Yeah, of course."

"So grumpy, Meg. You should liven up a little," he says, turning around and starting to walk away, smile firmly in place.

Megaera slams a fist on the table, startling the shades around her. "Listen here, you little shit!"

Zagreus almost falters in his steps. He should be used to violence by now; used to doling it out and receiving it. But there's something about Megaera's little display that reminds

him too much of someone else, and he almost flinches, almost shows weakness in front of everyone in the lounge.

Thankfully his mask holds and his body obeys him, so Zagreus simply walks out. Nyx is passing by the same hall, but he only nods at her. He's afraid of what might come out if he opens his mouth.

He debates going out to the courtyard and working off his anger, or maybe starting yet another run, but after five in a row he would like a break. (What a weird thing, for a god to want to rest.)

As he walks through the main hall, his father calls to him before he gets more than a few steps away from the desk.

"Boy."

Zagreus keeps walking.

"Boy, I'm talking to you."

Something slams down hard on the desk, and Zagreus just barely hides a wince at the noise.

"Zagreus!" Hades shouts, voice magically booming throughout the hall, bouncing off the walls and making sure everyone present knows what's happening. If there's something his father has always liked, it's to berate Zagreus in public.

Zagreus stops, turning around slowly and leveling a blank stare at his father. Normally, he would give a mocking 'yes, father?', or maybe a quip about how his name is more effective than epithets, or maybe even a disrespectful bow. But this time he only stands there, looking back at the Lord of the House.

They stare at each other for a few moments, tense. Hades obviously expects Zagreus to break the silence first, to wilt under the hard stare and give him a proper response or apology for whatever he might've done wrong.

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Zagreu's doesn't, and Hades clearly hasn't realized how much he's changed because he waits several minutes longer as if Zagreu's not saying anything in the first few minutes will change if he gives him more time. The image they're presenting in front of everyone in the hall must be hilarious to an outsider.

After a while, Hades is the one to break the silence, displeasure clear in his voice. "I am told you keep coming back before fighting Megaera. Is that correct?"

"Do you not trust your sources, father?" Sometimes Zagreu's wonders if they could ever have a normal conversation without fighting, or without tension permeating every word. To date, he can't remember it ever happening.

"What do you know of trust, boy?" Another staring contest, then, "Answer the question."

"Yes, father, that is very much correct. Your sources are good, congratulations."

Hades sighs—more of a huff, really—brows furrowed so low his eyes are tiny pinpricks of light contrasting against his gray face. It's a heavy stare, and it's not like Zagreu's is unaffected by it. It's just that he's learned to pretend really well.

"Do you think the others have time to stand around while you go gallivanting across my realm?"

Ha. Zagreu's almost chuckles, but restrains himself.

"You could always give them a break. I'm sure they'd appreciate it. They work so hard, after all."

"Contrary to you, it seems."

"Indeed, father."

There's a slight pause, as if Hades wasn't expecting Zagreu's to agree with him. Which is fair, since disagreeing with his father is one of Zagreu's favorite pastimes.

"If you have decided to stop your foolishness, then at least Megaera and the Hydra can go back to their usual work."

"Or you could have done that from the beginning and just let me go through."

"So that you could work even less? I don't think so."

Zagreus shrugs, turning and giving his back to Hades.

"We're not done here, boy," his father says as Zagreus starts walking away.

"Yes, we are." *We're more than done, father.*

"Zagreus! You come back here right this instant!"

But Zagreus keeps moving down the hall, towards Hypnos. Even though the distance between Hades' desk and Hypnos' station is quite big, it's not far enough away that Hades can't see exactly where he's going. Zagreus smiles at Hypnos as he gets closer, even as Hypnos eyes him warily, eyes going back and forth between Zagreus and Hades.

"Getting in trouble, are we?" Hypnos asks when Zagreus is within hearing range, trying for humor and falling on worry instead.

"You know me, Hypnos. I'm always getting in trouble, even when I don't want to." It's supposed to be funny, too. But it's also too close to the truth, and they both know it.

There's a handful of seconds where they just stare at each other, and then Zagreus lifts his hand and shows Hypnos the bottle.

Hypnos' eyes grow large, and he quickly looks around before forcing Zagreus' hand back down.

"Don't just go around showing bottles, Zag. You know Lord Hades doesn't permit them inside the house!"

"I know, but what's he gonna do, anyway? Shout at me? That

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happens all the time already. Send more wretches my way when I try to escape? I can deal with them. Express his disappointment? I mean, did you hear the conversation he and I just had?"

Hypnos bites his lip, and Zagreus smiles, waving his unoccupied hand. "Don't worry about it. Besides, how many times have I brought you and the others illicit beverages? No one has gotten in trouble for it, it makes no sense that it would start now."

"Yes, but your father is a little bit more mad at you than usual. 'Waste of resources', he said."

Zagreus leans forward, smile widening, a little bit of good humor shining through the numbness. "Yeah, but you have to admit it's funny."

Hypnos chuckles, then slaps a hand on his mouth. "I mean, kinda? Maybe?" he says, trying to sound uncertain, but Zagreus can hear the laughter he can't hide.

Hypnos adjusts his ledger and feather and casts a quick glance around the hall, nervous habits, before turning back to Zagreus. "How are you doing that, anyway? I mean, it's not like you're taking a dive in the Styx, right? That would be silly! But then again, how would you be able to get into the pool if you don't use the Styx—"

"I'm taking a dive in the Styx, you're right."

"I— what?"

"You're totally right."

Hypnos blinks at him. "Really?"

"Yup."

Hypnos' lips twitch, once, twice, before he regains control.

"Ah, I see. So you just jump in the river and let it bring you

back?”

“Yeah. You should have seen Charon's reaction when I did it the first time. I mean, I didn't see his reaction either, but I bet it was funny.” Zagreus grins and Hypnos smiles, giggling quietly, eyes still roaming the hall.

Zagreus had just come to give Hypnos the ambrosia and go, but... he was planning on going to see Chaos soon, so he might as well enjoy the company of one of the only people who seems happy to see him every time.

“Say, mate. Why don't you come to the lounge and enjoy this bottle with me?” Zagreus waves the bottle around again. He sees Hypnos' eyes widen when he notices it isn't nectar this time.

“Ah, right now? I'd love to! But... I'm kinda working? And I think Lord Hades is still looking this way...”

“C'mon Hypnos, you know you won't get in trouble. Leave any fallout to me.”

Hypnos takes a long look at his ledger, then at the line of shades that's basically moving by itself. “I don't want you to deal with the consequences by yourself, Zag.”

That's... well, that's incredibly appreciated. It's a novelty, really, to hear someone say that and actually mean it. But Zagreus knows his father will take it out on him only, no one else, so the point is moot.

“I appreciate the concern, Hypnos. But we both know how the punishment is gonna be doled out, so... just come and spend some time with me, won't you?”

Hypnos takes a look at Zagreus and the puppy eyes he's doing his best to keep on his face, and groans. “Alright then, I guess I can do that. Mayb—”

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“Great!” Zagreus doesn't give Hypnos time to back out, grabbing the edge of his blanket and pulling him along towards the lounge's hallway entrance (honestly, one of the best things Zagreus spent gems on). He looks to their left very briefly and, sure enough, his father is looking at them, face thunderous. But he doesn't say anything, just as Zagreus predicted. He's probably going to go on and on about it later, which is fine, as long as Hypnos doesn't get dragged into it.

(And no matter how awful Hades is, Zagreus suspects he might have a sweet spot for Hypnos. Otherwise Hypnos probably wouldn't have held his position for so long, right in the direct line of sight of the master of the house.)

“By the way, Zag, Thanatos was looking for you,” Hypnos says, as he lets Zagreus guide him through the shades.

“Was he?”

“Yup!”

Zagreus hums, choosing not to say anything. At some point in the past, even before the beginning of all this, Zagreus would have been happy that Thanatos was looking for him. There was a time when the thought of Thanatos sent something warm down to his stomach, made him all nervous and excited. Even when he'd started trying to escape, he'd still felt guilty that he hadn't talked to Thanatos about it in advance. He couldn't help how happy he'd been when Thanatos found him.

Now, though, the thought of standing in front of Thanatos while he berates him for yet another thing he's done wrong is unbearable.

Just thinking of Thanatos' monotone voice spouting some bullshit about work and responsibilities—the only things he seems to talk about, ever—makes Zagreus purse his lips in

visible displeasure, which is something he tries really hard not to do. He doesn't know how Hypnos takes Thanatos' reprimands with a smile every time. The worst expression he's seen on the other's face was Hypnos frowning a little bit, but that was more out of hurt than actual anger. Honestly, he doesn't know how Hypnos hasn't punched Thanatos in the face yet.

Thinking about Thanatos (and Megaera, and Hades, and—) threatens to crush the sliver of happiness he's managed to find lately, so he kicks those thoughts out and finds a table for them both. Megaera is still there, glaring at them, but Zagreus ignores her and tells Hypnos to do the same when he shifts nervously.

Despite everything, they spend some good time together, talking about silly things for probably much longer than Megaera or his father liked, but Zagreus was ignoring them, so it wasn't like he'd know either way. Zagreus is pretty sure this is the last time he's going to spend together with Hypnos, so he makes sure the conversation is light and funny, something good for Hypnos to remember him by.

After they part ways, Zagreus does another run and finds himself getting antsy.

He's suddenly eager to get on with his little plan—never mind that he doesn't even know if it'll work—but he still makes time to grab five more bottles of ambrosia. One for Achilles, one for Nyx, one for Dusa, one for Skelly, and one for Cerberus. He pretends the hardest he's ever had to, to hide that what he's really doing is saying goodbye.

With Nyx and Skelly it's easier, he just hands them the bottle and exchanges a few words with them. Nyx would never drink

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in the lounge, and Skelly tells Zagreus that he prefers to drink alone. Dusa barely stays long enough to give her thanks, all nervous and jittery before darting away to the rafters. Cerberus wags his tail and they play for a little bit, but soon he yawns and Zagreus lets him go take a nap.

With Achilles is harder, since they usually take the time to sit together and talk. But if there's one thing Zagreus has learned in all the centuries he's been alive, it's how to be a good liar. It's a must, if you intend on living in the House of Hades. So he lies through his teeth, smiles like everything's alright in his world, pays attention to Achilles and his cues, making sure he's playing the role of spoiled prince and endearing charge just right.

Achilles and the others are none the wiser, and by this point the guilt is easy to ignore.

Everything, except the emptiness inside him, has been surprisingly easy to ignore.

Before his last run, Zagreus does a basic sweep of the House. He doesn't stay long enough to fall into conversation with anyone, but he smiles and waves and jokes, committing to memory the faces he would like to remember for as long as he lives, which hopefully won't be long at all.

Then he steps through the portal in his courtyard with a silent, mental goodbye.



Chaos' domain is calm and quiet, a serenity that one wouldn't normally associate with the word *chaos*. It's definitely one of Zagreus' favorite places in the world, even though he

hasn't seen many. The only sound is a soft, low, continuous hum that permeates the place, almost like chaos itself is singing in the background. It's a strange thought, but one that seems to fit, and Chaos themselves had appreciated the idea when Zagreus shared his impression with them.

He feels Chaos' presence across the room, violet light dimmer than the Olympian boons. Not because Chaos is weaker, but because, no matter how strange they might look, they are not as flashy as the Olympians.

Zagreus can feel a pair of eyes—or many pairs—watching him, some curiosity in the air, but instead of going for the boon to chat with them, he walks to the edge and sits down. He's tempted to put his legs on the water, but also uncertain of what might happen to him if he does.

If he's going to do this, he's going to do it right.

He takes a breath and holds it in, exhaling slowly and rehearsing in his mind what he wants to say.

“Master Chaos... would you mind terribly if we talked for a moment?”

For a moment there's no response, though Zagreus feels the weight of that multi-eyed stare get heavier, because apparently Chaos is always interested in whatever he can't predict, and Zagreus has been counting on that. He has the egg with him, too, in the hopes that its presence might give him some courage, or that it might aid Chaos in what Zagreus is about to ask, or even that Chaos will take the presence of the egg as a sign of trust.

“Son of Hades,” Chaos says, suddenly in front of him.

Zagreus jumps a little and hears a slight chuckle that resonates inside his head. Chaos' layered voice is music to his

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ears, one of the few he's been able to hear without cringing or feeling like he needs to flee. (It's not hard to stay away from the voices that do get to him, though, since most of *those* people never seem to want to be in his presence in the first place.)

"What is it that you wish to talk about? I admit I did not foresee this deviation from the norm."

"Forgive me, Master Chaos, but today I won't be taking a boon, if everything goes accordingly."

"Oh? And what is it that you might want to take in its place? I am curious."

"I was wondering," and here Zagreus finally looks up into Chaos' purple eyes, the ones on his face, inscrutable in their neutral expression, "this might sound weird, but... would you be able to kill a god?"

It's not the type of question one simply utters out loud, especially not in places occupied by gods and minor deities. But Zagreus figures that, out of everyone, Chaos might be the one to take the question seriously and also as a joke, if only to indulge him out of pure curiosity.

Chaos hums, for a split second harmonizing with the sound in the background.

"Do you wish to kill a god, Son of Hades?"

Zagreus ignores how *Son of Hades* makes him feel. At first he had had no desire to find out what Chaos would do if Zagreus appeared to be antagonizing him. Then, as Zagreus got more comfortable in their presence, he hadn't wanted to dredge up an explanation for not wanting to be called that. And now there's no point in saying anything, because hopefully he won't be the son of anyone at all.

Scratching his neck, he lowers his eyes for a moment,

wondering how to proceed.

"Perhaps?"

"Hm." Chaos brings a hand to their chin, holding it slightly between fingers, their eyes never leaving him. "I suppose I could, though I am not the only one. You certainly know what your uncles and aunts have done to the Titans."

"Ah, yes, I know that... but the Titans aren't really dead, are they? As far as I know they were just ripped apart until they couldn't regenerate, but they're not gone. Right?"

"Indeed, that is the case, if you are referring to death as the cessation of being. I suppose your ancestors can be summarized as being out of commission."

"A very painful out of commission."

"Yes."

"Well, I was thinking of something more permanent."

"Do you mean a mortal death? A being going from one phase of life to the next?"

"That could be really interesting, but I don't think gods have an afterlife of their own."

"Indeed. I am glad you realize that. It would be foolish to hope for a heaven or a hell of some kind when your life is forever."

And ouch, that hits right on the question even before Zagreus asks. He almost suspects that Chaos knows his true intentions here, but then he remembers how unpredictable he apparently is, and that's what he's counting on this time; hoping that Chaos is surprised enough, entertained enough, to grant Zagreus his wish.

Chaos waits for him, unblinkingly, perhaps because they're beyond such mundane things.

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For a moment everything is silent, save for the hum in the background. Chaos lowers himself in front of Zagreus, curving forward as if to observe him better, feet disappearing in the water-not-water. It seems like it doesn't touch them at all. He wonders if the water is just an illusion, or if Chaos is just too out of the ordinary to touch anything material. Or maybe the water isn't something physical at all?

Ah, Zagreus thinks, wincing, feeling the shame rise inside his chest, I'm stalling.

Going 'round and 'round with his thoughts, avoiding thinking about what he came here to do. He's spent so much time thinking about it, planning his words and actions, saying goodbye to the people who matter, and now, when he's finally got a real chance, he almost wants to back out.

He still remembers the first time the thought crossed his mind.

It had been a good day, overall. He had trained with Achilles only for an hour, his little body still not used to so much exercise, and then he had gone to show off his newly acquired skills to the twins and Megaera. (It was easy to find them, back then. Thanatos and Hypnos were always together, and Megaera was never far off. Even when her sisters still lived in the house, she always preferred to spend her time away from them.)

After their play fight, with everyone on the ground panting, Nyx had approached and urged everyone to go inside and clean up. Zagreus was the last one to leave, and as he passed through the door of the training grounds, he'd flinched away when he saw his father standing there.

Hades had leveled a stare at him, barely dipping his head in

the process, as if Zagreus had been unworthy of even that small movement. That's not something that he had realized at the time, though. It'd taken him decades to grow up and understand all the little ways that Hades despised him; but at the time, that sort of thing barely registered in little Zagreus' head.

"You still need to practice more. If you're not good enough, then there's no reason for you to be here," Hades had said, voice even, emotionless.

Zagreus remembers feeling shocked, even though those words were nothing new. Every time Hades opened his mouth, there was a small part of Zagreus, tiny and fragile and foolish, that hoped for words of love or encouragement, or even just acknowledgement. Every time, he was let down. That time had been no different.

And yet.

As Hades had walked away, Zagreus' teary eyes following him, the only thing that had gone through Zagreus' head was *then maybe I should have never been born in the first place*.

He remembers blinking in shock at the thought, almost not understanding what it entailed. Death was such a foreign concept to his little godly mind, but his fists had been shaking, training sword faltering in his grasp and almost falling to the ground.

Nyx, who had been simply watching, had come up to him and put a hand on his head.

"Let's go inside, child." Her voice had been the same even tone she always used, but Zagreus had still felt comforted by her presence, by her hand, by her words. Nyx had been a safe place, back then. (A safe place that hadn't lasted long after that,

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but at that point she was still a huge presence in Zagreus' little world.)

Back in the present, Zagreus blinks as he brings his hand to his lap, twisting his fingers. "So, would you be able to unmake a god?"

Chaos shifts, as if rearranging themselves. "By unmake, do you mean to cease to be, then?"

"Yes. To unravel their existence as if they were never there."

"Hm."

Chaos blinks at Zagreus, and he holds their gaze. It's difficult because Chaos always seems to know more, seems to look into his soul and peer at all his little secrets and desires. That's not actually true, because Zagreus trusts Chaos when they say they can't predict him, but the sensation is unnerving anyway. Still, Zagreus maintains eye contact, determined to impress the importance of his question.

"You bring me the most interesting questions, Son of Hades. I believe it would be possible, yes."

Okay, here it is. Deep breath.

"Then... would you be so kind as to do me a favor?"

"I shall do my best. What do you wish for?"

"Could you unmake *me*?"

Another silence. Chaos' other eyes slowly turn to him as well. Even the symbol on their forehead, usually static, seems to be observing him somehow.

"Unmake?"

"Yes."

"Not 'kill'?"

"No."

"A permanent state?"

“Yes.”

“That is very drastic. What an unusual favor you ask of me.”

“I am aware, Master Chaos. I promise I wouldn't ask if I hadn't thought about it for a long time.”

“May I ask why?”

The truth?

Chaos is maybe willing to do something irreversible simply because Zagreus asked... so yes, the truth.

“I'm tired.” He buries his face in his hands, feeling the lump in his throat. “I'm so tired of all of this, Master Chaos. I just want to rest.”

“...I suppose the form of rest you speak of cannot be acquired from the God of Sleep?”

Oh, the words and the memory they bring forth hurt, though Chaos has no way of knowing that.

Hypnos didn't need to grant Zagreus' wishes, didn't even need to pay attention, it's not like gods sleep much. And yet, he did. And Zagreus, for a split second, had considered asking Hypnos to put him to sleep forever. He flinches, imagining the look of horror on Hypnos' face, knowing he's the one who would have put it there.

Selfish, he thinks, and almost laughs at the irony of it all.

“No. It can't.”

More silence. Then Chaos sighs, something they don't do very often. “May I propose something else to you?”

Zagreus almost says no. The word is on the tip of his tongue, furious and sharp, pushing to get out. After all the preparation and the mental conversations he's had with himself, he just wants this to be over and done with. (And preferably before he loses his nerve and backs out.)

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Still, he lifts his head from his hands and says, "Sure."

"What if I were to remake you, instead?"

"...Remake me?"

"Yes. You are made of a variety of pieces, and from everything you have told me so far, I believe some of those pieces might be the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"You have chthonic parts from your father and, I suppose, from Nyx as well, if she did what I believe she did. And then some part of you is olympian, and an even smaller part is human."

"Human? Part of me is human?" The thought is strange; he doesn't like or dislike it, but there is something world-shifting in finding out you're partially mortal.

And yet I can't seem to make use of that mortality, he thinks ruefully.

"Yes. Your birth mother is half-olympian, half-human. That is the reason you have red blood. I believe it is common in mortals."

Persephone had never said anything about that, but it's not like they had a lot of time to talk... and it's not like she seemed all that interested in telling him about herself, anyway. They spent most of their precious minutes talking about him. Maybe she was always going to ask him to leave, from the very beginning, and him knowing more about her would have just made it harder. It's an uncharitable thought, but Zagreus has spent a lot of time lately realizing they don't really know each other at all.

And how can you love someone you don't know?

"And you said I have something of Nyx's, too?" he asks, eager

to be distracted.

“It is only a small part of you, but I believe it's what allowed you to be brought back to life after you were stillborn. The essence she must have given you probably restarted your heart. It is most likely the reason you take to the darkness so well, since neither your father nor your birth mother have a knack for it.”

Zagreus always thought the reason the darkness resonated with him was because of Nyx, and it seems he was right, just not in the way he had thought. The love he feels for her swells in his chest, but is soon taken over by guilt and shame and the ever present feeling of *run run run*.

“I see. So what would you do exactly, Master Chaos?”

“The only one of your parents bound to the Underworld is your father. Nyx can come and go as she pleases, and Persephone has also never been affected by the boundaries, even when she seemed displeased with the atmosphere.”

“You met her? When she was here?”

“No, I've never met her directly. But I do like to spy on my children, from time to time.”

Everyone is my child, young Zagreus, Chaos had said once. Zagreus still had a hard time wrapping his head around that.

“Alright, so I'm bound here because of my father. What now?”

“I will extricate that part from you, and we will see if that solves your problem.”

“So I would, essentially, not be his son anymore? You would take his... essence from me?”

“Parenthood is not only about who came from whom, as you well know. But when we speak of gods, there is more to it

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than just the ichor that runs through their veins, or blood in your case. Children take on their parents' energy as well."

"Energy as in...?"

"As in the very components of their being."

"Oh."

"It's what separates divinity from mortality. All the gods you've met appear to have flesh, no? But theirs is just an illusion of sorts, something they unconsciously pick up when they're born. It is... a defense mechanism, shall we say, that allows them to have a form in the material world." Chaos floats lower, as if they're sitting on an invisible chair. "Mortal flesh is entirely material, and therefore cannot be changed at the user's will. Well, not that many gods change their appearances either, except for your uncle Zeus."

"So gods and mortals are fundamentally different."

"Yes, but not so much that they cannot reproduce. You are proof of that."

Zagreus didn't come to Chaos for a biology lesson, but he would be lying if he said this isn't one of the most interesting conversations they've had.

It's also enjoyable to talk with someone older, who knows way more than him, without feeling dumb. Chaos has always responded to his questions with the utmost patience, sometimes even amusement, without making Zagreus feel bad for not knowing all the answers already, or for daring to ask in the first place.

"So even if you take his parts away, I'll still be connected to him?"

"What I meant is that even if I take away everything inside you that came from Hades, that won't change the fact that he

raised you. You cannot erase those experiences.”

Ha. Raised. Haha.

“Ah, yes. I wasn't actually worried about that.”

Chaos nods. “Very well. Then if everything has been explained, shall we begin?”

His heart beats fast and loud in his ears. Zagreus suspects that if he was less god and more human, he would be sweating from sheer nerves. But there's a part of him that's excited for this; a chance to keep on living without being bound to one single place.

“Master Chaos, what if it doesn't work?”

“It most likely will. But if it doesn't... I will honor your original wish.”

Zagreus has some difficulty reading Chaos' tone of voice most of the time, but he thinks they almost sound sad. Still, it's a relief to have someone willing to help him, even as they're clearly unhappy with his choice.

“Thank you, Master Chaos.”

Chaos inclines their head. “Now let's begin.”

“Alright. What should I do?”

“Come into the water.”

“Oh, okay. ”

The memory of jumping into the Styx flashes through his mind and Zagreus smiles to himself, finding what little humor he can while his breathing comes in short bursts. He's shaking a little, unable to hide his nerves, but Chaos doesn't comment on it.

He stands up and walks toward the edge of the stone, where the black and violet water shines back at him.

Until he had breached the surface some time ago, the only

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other times he had seen the sky at any time of day was in old paintings and old books. He had read about the night sky, how the stars were infinite and bright and beautiful, and he had seen glimpses of it on Nyx when she moved just right. But he'd never seen it in person.

The ocean in Chaos' domain looks just like the paintings, just like Nyx's hair wings.

He moves forward and sits at the edge, legs up. There's a moment of vertigo, where he feels like he's going to fall into an endless sky. But then he puts one foot into the water, and the sensation is so weird that it distracts him from the thought. It's like nothing he's felt before; the water is not really water, though it moves like it, when he compares it with other waters he's experienced.

The Styx is definitely water, although magical in nature, and it actually soaks his clothes even though it disappears the moment Zagreus touches whatever is in the pool of blood. The pool itself is something other, a heavy liquid that acts like blood, dense and suffocating.

Chaos' ocean almost feels like nothing.

Zagreus slowly lowers one leg into it, and then the other. He can see the water moving around him, reacting to his presence, but the sensation is like smoke, something silky, gossamer. Something so light that it's almost not there.

Taking a deep breath, Zagreus closes his eyes and can't help the way his mind travels to places and people.

He has made a concerted effort not to think about his mother since their last conversation, but now all the minutes they spent together twist inside his thoughts.

An unbearable sadness threatens to drown him for a

moment. Sadness for all the moments they could have had, if the Fates had only allowed it. For all the hugs he didn't get, for all the accomplishments he couldn't share with her. For all the hours they didn't spend in the garden, while Persephone taught him how to take care of flowers and fruits. For all the times he lay in bed wishing to hear just one single *I love you* from the people who raised him.

For all the centuries they spent apart, unaware of each other's existence.

Before he can start second-guessing himself like he knew he would, he jumps.



Zagreus has felt a lot of physical pain in his life.

It's par for the course, when you're a god. And when you're a prince. And when your father believes you're ready to train at twenty years old.

Gods age differently than mortals, so Zagreus has no idea what the equivalent would be, but he remembers being small and afraid. The training swords on the training grounds were so heavy that Achilles had made one just for him, small and of light wood, suitable for a child. It took him decades to recognize the look on Achilles face during those first years. Regret.

Later, much later, Achilles had confided that some human children also started very young, just like Zagreus.

But just because something's tradition, doesn't mean it's right. Always remember that, lad, Achilles had said at the end of one session.

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Zagreus had taken it to heart, like most of what Achilles said, because he was half-father and half-brother and half-hero.

Those first few years were filled with pain, from sore muscles to broken bones, scrapes and bruises and open wounds. Then he started training with Thanatos and Megaera, occasionally Tisiphone and Alecto, and the pain had multiplied tenfold. He usually sported a parade of bruises and cuts by the end of training sessions, but at least the others weren't much better.

When he started vying for his freedom, he admittedly wasn't prepared for the different level of brutality that awaited him. He learned fast, though. Strike before they get a chance to hit you, and if it hurts, it means you're still able to move, so *move*.

Dying is, unsurprisingly, the most painful thing Zagreus has ever gone through, because to stop his godly body from functioning, people need to hit him *hard*. He's been hacked and slashed and cut into pieces more times than he can count now, by strangers and friends alike.

So yeah, Zagreus knows a thing or two about pain, and he usually bears it well.

This, though? He wasn't prepared for this.

He has a handful of seconds to open his eyes and admire the black, starry void around him, hints of purples and violets winking in the distance. He can breathe and he can move. He imagines this must be what swimming in a cloud feels like.

And then the pain comes.

It starts on his skin; something that feels like fire burning the hairs on his arms, the peach fuzz on his cheeks, the hair on his head. It gets inside him, lighting up all nerve endings like he's just been dropped in lava. Except lava isn't this cold and

doesn't hurt this much.

It eats his muscles like a hungry creature, chomping on him and tearing him apart, piece by little piece.

It hits his bones, as if trying to suck the marrow out of them, or maybe suck the bones themselves out of him, turn him upside down until all that's left is a grotesque mass of limbs and blood.

He's unaware of what he's doing, the agony so intense it's impossible to concentrate on anything else. But he's sure that if his mouth still works, then he's definitely screaming. Not that anyone would hear him down here, at the edge of the Underworld.

When it seems like it can't possibly get worse, it hits something inside him. His core, his soul, his energy. Whatever. The name doesn't matter; what matters is that this, *this* is the worst pain he's ever felt, and probably will ever feel, and some part of his brain desperately screams *no no no stop please stop!* over and over again.

Another part of him thinks, *fuck, this better be worth it.*

And as abruptly as the pain began, it stops, as if it was never there, and it takes something from him when it does.

Something so close to what he is and who he is that he mourns it, reaches a mental arm in its direction, but he can't touch it. Whatever the pain took, it's forever beyond his grasp now, and all it leaves behind is some terrible ache that has nothing to do with his physical body.

But something is new here. The hole that should have been in his being is full. Full to the brim and overflowing with something old, something powerful, something endless.

Zagreus opens his eyes and stares into infinity, into the

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immeasurable eons of time and space, the vastness of the cosmos that he suddenly knows exists beyond this realm, beyond this little round piece of rock where everything he's ever known lives.

He stares into infinity and infinity stares back.

He reaches for it, some desperate, childlike part of him wanting to feel safe, to be held. To his relief, it reaches back, cradling him in its never-ending embrace, a thousand limbs and a thousand hands, gentle and warm and careful with the new life it has created.

Infinity tells him *rest now*, so Zagreus closes his eyes and allows himself the oblivion of sleep.

He dreams of stars he's never seen, and a field of poppies he's never been to.

Razia

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Zagreus hasn't come back yet.
Hypnos eyes the pool for the millionth time,
waiting, hoping that any minute now he'll see a
familiar form emerge from it.

The pool remains still.

It's been almost a full surface day. Hypnos knows this because Hypnos always knows the time accurately, but also because he always counts the hours Zagreus spends away. He can't help it, really. This time, Zagreus had left after talking to Achilles, throwing a wave and a small smile in Hypnos' direction before disappearing through the halls. He had seemed sadder somehow, at least sadder than usual, and now he'd been gone longer than usual as well.

So Hypnos has been counting, part out of habit and part conscious effort to keep some kind of tab on Zagreus, always afraid that he's going to disappear the moment Hypnos isn't looking.



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Zagreus has always felt... fleeting. Like at any moment he's going to turn a corner and disappear, and that's the last image Hypnos will have of him, of his strong back walking away. Here one moment, gone the next. And gone so quickly that there was no chance to say goodbye. Like a dream.

It's an old fear of his, an anxiety that he does his best to ignore. But it likes to rear its ugly head from time to time, to taunt him.

Everyone you love will eventually leave you, it says.

And that goes double for Zagreus, who has always given Hypnos the impression that he doesn't like being in the House, like he was just waiting for the moment something gave and he'd have the chance to escape. When Zagreus had disappeared that first time, Hypnos' heart had stopped for a split second, a deep fear settling into him as Thanatos had snarled something rude about Zagreus and teleported away.

The relief he felt when Zagreus had stepped out of the pool, looking angry and confused but still *there*, was so potent that he had almost fallen to the floor. Instead of greeting him like he'd wanted (throwing his arms around him and expressing his relief that he was okay), Hypnos had put on a big smile and welcomed him back in an attempt to distract Zagreus from whatever had put that frown on his face.

It had worked, a little bit. Zagreus was one of the few who always had a smile for Hypnos, even when he was worried or anxious or simply cranky. Hypnos appreciates that so much, and he wishes he was brave enough to tell Zagreus that, to thank him for taking the time of day to talk to him at all.

But talking to Zagreus normally is so hard when he smiles at Hypnos like he's actually listening, like Hypnos isn't stumbling

all over his words 99% of the time. It's hard because Zagreus is handsome and kind and respectful and completely so far out of Hypnos' league.

Hypnos knows he puts his foot in his mouth a lot, and gives Zagreus a bunch of horseshit advice because he has nothing else to offer. It's just that he wants to keep Zagreus' eyes on him a little bit longer.

It's been a full day since he's seen those eyes at all. Normally Hypnos wouldn't worry, even though Zagreus' escape attempts never last longer than a few hours. It's not like he's Zagreus' only friend, either. Actually, Zagreus has lots of friends because he treats everyone fairly. But Hypnos can't help the little seed of concern growing in him—despite the very real possibility that Zagreus just decided to hang out with one of the shades in Tartarus, or maybe even Charon, for longer than usual—because Zagreus has been... weird, lately.

He's been either avoiding his escapes or simply never completing them. On purpose.

Hypnos has caught him staring into nothing many times since he started acting strange, a blank look on his face. He had never realized how expressive Zagreus normally is until he had seen that emptiness in his eyes. Someone as open as Zagreus should never look so stifled, like they're locking their feelings away, like something it's broken and not getting fixed.

Hypnos would like to fix it. Or to help Zagreus fix it. Or to find someone more competent than him to help Zagreus fix it. Because Hypnos is afraid that he would make it worse, that he might cause what was left standing to crumble to dust forever with all his fumbling limbs and fumbling words.

He's contemplating how he could approach Zagreus about it

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when he sees him next, hoping Zagreus will heed his concern and not deflect like he's been doing lately, when something tugs at his mind.

It feels like a wish, the ones he gets from mortals and immortals alike. Wishes for a calm night, a good dream, a deep rest. It's faint, distant, as if in another plane. Hypnos doesn't get many of those, but he weaves a little bit of dream thread into the wish, makes sure it's tied firmly to it, and sends it back.

Whoever's at the other side pokes him again, but it feels almost automatic, like they don't know they're doing it. They feel familiar, but then again everyone feels familiar. Hypnos is pretty sure every sentient creature on this Earth has slept at least once, and he never forgets a sleeping mind.

He feels like he can almost get a name from it, if he pushes... but they seem a little fragile, a little new, and Hypnos can't bring himself to risk their integrity. The mind leaves him then, falling into a deep, deep sleep.

Oh well. A job well done.



It's been two days, and Zagreus has never been away that long because, frankly, there's nowhere for him to go.

Contrary to people like Thanatos and Megaera, Zagreus doesn't have a job that requires going outside the House—doesn't have a job inside the House either, because the only time he tried, it didn't go over well—and even if he had, he could never do it for long.

Hypnos knows; he counts. He's good at it.

It's been fifty two hours since he last saw Zagreus. Dusa had

commented at some point that she hadn't seen him either, the last time Achilles talked to him was the day before yesterday, and no, Hypnos is not going to worry too much because Zagreus is strong and knows how to take care of himself and doesn't need Hypnos hovering over his shoulder and wondering where he is because then Zagreus would get annoyed and Hypnos wouldn't know what to do with Zagreus' anger when it's directed at him and—

Breathe, Hypnos, he tells himself, in a voice suspiciously similar to Zagreus'.

He takes a deep breath, then another, and tries to think. Where would Zagreus be? He's not in the House, Dusa confirmed that for him. He doesn't have a domain of his own, so he can't be there. Could he be wandering around Tartarus? Megaera also hasn't appeared, so it stands to reason that Zagreus didn't fight her.

Zagreus had been particularly satisfied with himself for discovering the whole Styx thing. It had been a while since Hypnos had seen any type of genuine humor coming from him, and that smile, small but full of mischief, had been very real.

Maybe this is a new prank. Walking around Tartarus, not showing up at the House, wondering how long it will take for Thanatos or Megaera or even Lord Hades himself to get fed up with him and go fetch him.

Yes, that must be it.

There's no reason to think something happened, to wonder if he's hurt somewhere, or lost, or maybe just too sad to come out. Zagreus will appear sooner or later, mischief shining in his eyes even through the dullness, ready to tell Hypnos what he's been up to.

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Hypnos smiles to himself, pushing his concern down, and turns his attention back to his tasks.

If his eyes stray to the pool every few minutes, no one pays enough attention to him to care.



Hypnos finally allows himself to worry in full when a week goes by and there's been no sign of Zagreus. Dusa has been keeping an eye out for him too, but nothing so far. He's not hiding in any corner of the House, so it stands to reason that he must be out there, somewhere in Tartarus.

Megaera hasn't seen him, so he can't have gone any further. Right?

Hypnos knows Zagreus is friends with Sisyphus, but a quick question to the shades revealed that they haven't seen Zagreus in Sisyphus' chamber lately.

It's improbable, a stupid thought, but Hypnos wonders if he's hurt somewhere. If maybe he's stuck, or has been captured, or is simply too injured to make his way back. He quickly dismisses it; no one would dare touch the Prince of the Underworld... unless it was on Lord Hades' orders.

He swallows, keeping his eyes firmly on the documents in front of him, even as the object of his suspicions keeps talking at the end of the hall.

Lord Hades could very well be punishing Zagreus for the whole 'waste of resources' thing, or for Zagreus blatantly waving bottles of illegal substances around, or for distracting other people from their work, or even just for being Zagreus.

Hypnos is not in the habit of letting his thoughts run in this

direction because if he did, he would get incredibly angry at Lord Hades and the other people in the House who insist on not seeing Zagreus for the wonderful person that he is (insist on not seeing Hypnos at all, but in his case he can at least admit there's nothing much worth seeing).

He would get angry, and then he wouldn't be able to hide that anger, and then he might do something he would regret later... like telling people exactly what he thinks about them and everything else.

He would lose his job, for once. Not that he cares much for it, but being allowed in the House comes with the perk of being close to the people that matter to him. He sees the way her sisters being banned from entering the House affects Megaera, no matter how much she denies it, and he wouldn't want to put that stress on his mother and brother.

But who says they would miss you? They might not even notice you're gone, says the dark voice inside him, the one that Hypnos can't help but pay attention to from time to time. It's low and bitter, and sounds like the part of him he's always trying to hide.

But still, losing his job would be inconvenient. Not only that, if someone were to retaliate to his words, he might be forced to fight and use his powers in a way he hasn't done in centuries. People would get hurt. And none of those people would be Hypnos.

He'd rather not hurt anyone, if he can help it.

So Hypnos takes a deep, deep breath, centering himself—the way he does every time those thoughts come to him—and wonders who he can ask to go take a look around Tartarus for him. There are several shades willing to bypass security and Hades' ire for a handful of poppy seeds, though he can always

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offer some poppy sap if they're hesitant.

He's in the middle of his planning when Thanatos materializes in front of him in a burst of green light.

"Thanatos, hi! I haven't seen you in a whi—"

"Not now, Hypnos. Have you seen Zagreus?"

Of course. Hypnos would be envious, if he didn't understand the urge to see Zagreus with his own eyes, too. (But it hurts that Thanatos' priorities never include him.)

"Not at all! It's been a week since I've last talked to him," he answers, pretending his stomach doesn't churn at those words.

"That fool. Whatever he's playing at now has gotten Lord Hades fuming. I bet he's hiding somewhere."

Ah, so Lord Hades isn't responsible for Zagreus' disappearance. Good to know. Hypnos feels some relief at that, even as he darts a quick look at the main desk. Lord Hades doesn't seem any angrier than usual. "Ah, to tell you the truth I was beginning to worry and was wondering if *you* had seen him."

"Listen, contrary to what people like to gossip, I don't go following Zagreus around. I have more important things to do than be his babysitter."

"Yes, of course, I wasn't implying that! But I know you help him out there sometimes, so I just thought you might know something, that's all!"

Thanatos crosses his arms, leveling a look at Hypnos.

"What about you, Hypnos? You guys have been very close, lately. Has he mentioned anything to you?"

If Hypnos didn't know better, he would have said that was jealousy in Thanatos' voice. Which doesn't make sense, because anyone with eyes would take a good look at both of them and

immediately realize that Hypnos could never even hope to gain Zagreus' affections. And anyone who's known them both for any measure of time would know that Thanatos is obviously the superior choice. Thanatos is handsome, hardworking, competent, doesn't fumble in front of pretty boys with pretty smiles and kind words.

Nevermind that Zagreus hasn't blushed in Thanatos' presence in some time now, or that Hypnos has noticed the tension growing between them, the way Thanatos likes to pick on everything Zagreus does, and the way Zagreus seems more and more fed up with it.

In the grand scheme of things, Hypnos would still be one of the least suitable choices for the Prince of the Underworld. And that's fine.

It's fine.

Really.

Thanatos' expression gets tighter and tighter as Hypnos takes a few seconds too long to answer, so he quickly says, "No, he didn't say anything! And even if he had, I'm not the type of person who tells other people's secrets, Thanatos, how could you think that of me?"

Thanatos sighs, clearly trying to reign in his irritation. "This isn't a matter of keeping someone's secrets, Hypnos. If you know something, you need to tell me. Lord Hades has asked other servants to look into it, too, because this whole 'waiting around for Zagreus' business has gone on for far too long."

"I told you, I don't know anything. Besides... don't you think there might be a reason to worry?"

Thanatos seems confused at his question. "Worry? Why?"

"Ah, you know... Zag isn't usually one to just up and

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disappear like that, right? He's never done that before!"

"But he's done other foolish things. It wouldn't be out of character for him."

"I guess... I just think it's weird, that's all. He should have shown up by now."

"You worry too much, Hypnos."

And Thanatos doesn't worry enough, but Hypnos isn't going to tell him that. He would never hear the end of it.

"Well," Hypnos answers, "if you find Zag, will you let me know?"

"I'm sure he's going to make himself known when someone finds him and drags him back. I'm going back to work now."

"Alright then, have a good d—" Thanatos disappears before Hypnos can finish.

He slaps on a smile, large and fake, and turns back to the line slowly growing in front of him, welcoming some shades who had materialized some time ago, but had been too shy to come forward. Hypnos had almost jumped when the pool had bubbled, and had had to restrain his disappointed face when they were just normal shades, instead of Zagreus. The shades had huddled in a corner while Hypnos kept watch, face carefully schooled to his default, pleasant expression.

The little group finally approaches him, and he ushers them forward, making his annotations as they move. He's in a bad mood, but he does his best to hide it. It wouldn't do to scare the newcomers away before they get sorted.

He has his godly duties to attend to in a few hours. He can already feel mortals getting sleepy, soft wishes washing over him. It's enough to make him sleepy too, and he just knows he's going to have to fall asleep on the job again in order to do his

other job—the one that's ten times more important, but somehow everyone seems to forget he has.

The line moves slightly, Lord Hades complains loudly about something, the newcomers stick close together, and Hypnos simply floats there.

The only thing he can do, for now, is wait for good news.



He wants to open his eyes, but they don't listen to him. It's not like there's something stopping them from opening, they aren't injured. It's more like he has simply forgotten how.

In fact, his whole body seems disconnected, like a puppet with its strings cut. Almost as if he doesn't have a body at all.

Something touches his arm, a tiny spark, and he's suddenly jolting up and awake, without any conscious effort on his part. He takes a look around and stares, mouth open in shock. He has no idea where he is, but it's the most beautiful place he's ever seen—not even the old paintings could compare. Stars swirl around themselves everywhere he looks, in the distance and also up close, so close he can almost feel their heat. The backdrop is void black and chaos purple, but the colors are strangely vibrant, like he's seeing a new side of them.

Something whizzes past him, fast and bright and cold, leaving a trail of ice behind it. If he concentrates hard enough, he can taste the ice crystals on his tongue.

Even though it feels like maybe he doesn't *have* a tongue?

Everything's weird, and his memories are slow in returning. He remembers heat, a steady warmth. Maybe fire? It was all around him, all the time, surrounding him inside and out.

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Warm, but suffocating. He remembers wanting to escape, and succeeding once, only to be dragged back down by red red red.

My name is Zagreus, he thinks, suddenly, like a little fire springing to life.

My name is Zagreus, and I'm... I'm... who am I?

A star in the distance explodes in a shower of light and sparks, but Zagreus has no time to appreciate its beauty as the corners of his vision blacken, the world closing in around him. His lungs suddenly stop working, and he brings his hands to his chest in panic, only for them to go through as if he's not solid.

As if he's not there at all.

My name is Zagreus, he thinks again, desperately, despairingly.

zagreus

...He knows this voice.

yes, you do. you must remain calm

But he's dying!

no. you are living. or rather, you simply are

No lungs!

no lungs necessary

No eyes!

you do not need physical eyes to see

No body!

untrue. your body is simply not here at this moment

Oh.

remain calm

...Master Chaos?

yes

...Oh.

Infinity embraces him, its touch cool like a river, like the

snow that covers the surface in thick, powdered layers. It cradles him close to its core, a bright point of light surrounded by giant masses of dust. A star forming itself for eternity.

The memories hit him like a wretched thug's mace to the solar plexus, something he's unfortunately become intimately familiar with. Vertigo pulls him into its grasp for a moment, then releases him as his world rights itself, and his memories slide into place like they never left.

come. let us talk in a more familiar space

The bright points of light around them become stripes as they move faster than Zagreus has ever moved, and before he can blink with his intangible eyes, he's looking down at a small blue dot. A blink, and the blue is suddenly an ocean, deep waters, a distant shore made of snow and evergreen trees. Another blink and he's staring at himself, naked, lying down on the stone.

Chaos' domain pulses around them, energies and colors and lights that the old Zagreus could never have detected, much less understood.

He touches down on the platform and wavers for a second, uncertain if his non-feet can keep him up, before his sense of balance kicks in. He takes a few test steps, clinging to the memory of weight that a physical body possesses.

"This is so weird," he mutters.

you will get used to it, but for now I believe going back to your physical form might be more beneficial

His body is still, chest unmoving. He looks very... dead.

"Okay, let's try this." Zagreus throws himself at his body, hoping that touching it might spark the connection that exists between them. It works, and he's suddenly sucked down and

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into his body, like smoke being inhaled, his physical mouth opening to let his soul in.

There's a brief period of stillness, then a loud gasp escapes him as he sits up in a rush, physical weight suddenly so alien that he lists to the side and falls. He smacks an elbow against the ground painfully, before his hands manage to catch himself.

Zagreus groans, head lowered. "This is unpleasant."

"I suppose it is, although I would not know."

He blinks, looking up to see Chaos floating above him with the same appearance he's used to. But this time, behind the physical facade Chaos maintains, Zagreus sees the shadows of limbs and eyes, too many and still too few, even though he can't remember the exact number. It's as if he's seeing two different images overlapping, switching places every so often.

The truth, and the mask. The mask, and the truth.

Chaos lowers himself to be level with Zagreus. Even though they sport a blank expression, Zagreus knows they're content. He blinks, surprised, realizing he can now read Chaos' moods much better than before. Possibly because he doesn't need to depend solely on his limited physical eyes anymore.

"I think it's gonna take me some time to get used to this," he whispers, exhilarated and fearful in equal measure.

"Yes, I thought it might." Chaos runs their eyes—*all* of them—over him. "There doesn't seem to be anything out of place or disconnected in any way. I believe the remaking was successful."

Zagreus sighs, a tension he hadn't noticed leaving his shoulders. Looking at his hands, he notices he's a little paler than usual and his skin is smooth, all his previous scars gone.

I wish I could see myself, he thinks, and a mirror materializes

in front of him. It has no definite borders, with its edges swirling in and out of existence like smoke, but it is definitely a mirror.

“What the fuck.”

“You are made mostly of chaotic energy now, which might grant you new abilities. And inside my domain those abilities are amplified,” Chaos answers, amused.

“So I can just make anything?” he asks, voice high with incredulity.

Chaos hums. “I don't believe you can create life, but most inanimate objects are probably within your reach here. It's only a matter of concentration.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but is unsure of what to say. The possibilities are unending and overwhelming, and he's going to have to sit down and figure them out. He feels a bit faint.

But then he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and is immediately distracted. Is that...? He needs to get closer. Getting up slowly, having to relearn his body, the way the muscles shift beneath the new skin, he tries to walk towards it. The first few steps are precarious, like a newborn learning to walk; muscle memory returns quickly, and Zagreus approaches the mirror with trepidation.

The red in his right eye is gone, no iris and no pupil left. The old, dull black has been replaced by the darkness of space, swirling with a million stars inside, flashes of all the colors in existence glimmering away. A mirror of the universe and a clear sign of what resides inside him now. What he's made of. The green eye is still there, and he appreciates it, regardless of how it brings some bad memories too.

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And yeah, he's a little paler than usual, but he supposes some time in the sun might change that.

The thought of the sun morphs into thoughts of outside, of freedom, of cold green grass under his feet and a bright blue sky over his head. Happiness bubbles inside him. The sensation is almost foreign at this point; Zagreus can't remember the last time he's felt so excited.

He would go running outside right now, if he weren't naked.

That sounds like something he should try to fix. He breathes in, breathes out, concentrating on his old clothes, trying to bring the mental image into reality. It takes some concerted effort, and he probably stands there for a couple of minutes, though Chaos only observes, no reprimands coming from them.

He tries to overlap his thoughts with what he's seeing in the mirror, almost like mentally painting the clothes over himself. The pants come first, in a deep black, then the chiton in a dark grey, and a simple black belt with no jewelry whatsoever. No skulls, no bracelets, no red ribbon, no laurels. Nothing that could distinguish him as belonging to the House of Hades.

For a few moments there's a disconnect between what he's seeing and what he expects to see when he looks in a mirror. The Zagreus staring back at him looks like a commoner, some random citizen he might have stumbled onto at any random city.

He doesn't look like a prince. (He doesn't look like himself.)

But regret doesn't settle in his heart, the way he was afraid it might. Zagreus has never liked being a prince in the first place, all the attention and demands and expectations more a form of torture than anything else. Being royalty kept him away from

making more friends when he was little, Nyx always on his case about fraternizing with servants and random shades. To this day she still gets upset when he talks to Dusa, which is just ridiculous, and part of why Zagreus has always hated his status.

Not having the royal laurels on his head is strange. And freeing. (And he's not himself anymore.)

“Master Chaos. Am I— am I free?”

“I believe so, but you should go and test it.”

He wants to. He wants it so much. There's fear, but also anticipation, hope, some childish excitement that he hasn't felt in so long. He shifts to move away from the mirror, and his eyes land on his feet.

Oh.

His feet are... normal. No more glowing like hot coals, no more fire everywhere he goes. No more burning grass and little flowers under his feet.

Everything he had of his father is gone.

Zagreus, in some of his more selfish moments, had always thought that he wouldn't mind not having anything related to his father. There were times when he couldn't even look in the mirror, not wanting to see the red eye staring back at him. Sometimes he would flinch when people commented how much he looked like Hades; that they thought of his father when they saw his feet, or his red eye, or his clothes.

Not having any type of visual reminder was a wish—a selfish, horrible wish that Zagreus had never dared utter out loud. And yet, here he is, wish granted by his own hand. He *could* put all those reminders back. He could, but he won't.

He's not completely satisfied with this outcome, and it's hard to explain why, even to himself. A cocktail of emotions is

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brimming just beneath the surface, clamoring for his attention, for him to open their box and take a look inside. But he knows that if he does that now, he's not going to leave this place for a long while.

So he buries them down, telling himself he will deal with them later.

(Zagreus has always been good at running away, after all.)

He turns to Chaos. "How do I leave? Do I need to go the usual route? 'Cause I'd rather no one saw me."

"If you wish to move unseen, then you will remain unseen."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," Chaos says, casual words a little weird coming from them, but Zagreus always appreciates that Chaos tries out new words because of him.

"What if I want to come back here? To see you?"

"Then you may come back at any moment. Although, you should know that you can see me anytime, anywhere."

"Wait, really?" Zagreus asks, feeling relieved. He wants to leave this place, yes, but he owes everything to Chaos, and right now they're the only part of his family that he wishes to see at all.

"Of course, Zagreus. Do not forget that most of you is made of chaos now. We are connected in a way we were not, before."

Chaos sounds pleased, happy even, and Zagreus feels those feelings echoed inside his chest.

"I thought you couldn't exactly leave this place."

"Mostly, I cannot. But I created this world; everything is connected to me, in one way or another. As I mentioned, it's a matter of concentration. If you concentrate in the proper way, then we can communicate."

"I understand," Zagreus says, trying to swallow the lump in

his throat. "Master Chaos, thank you so much for what you did for me. I know I asked for a lot, and you didn't have to."

"You were suffering. I could not simply stand back and watch. That you came to me when you needed help pleases me." Chaos blinks, something rare for them, and his eyes seem to look into Zagreus' soul. "Thank you for trusting me."

Zagreus is not going to cry. He's not.

Oh, he's crying.

Okay, okay, this is okay. Chaos won't think less of him, right? They wouldn't. There's nothing wrong with crying. (No matter how many times people told Zagreus that he shouldn't cry because things could be worse, or that he should be ashamed of trying to make people feel guilty with tears.)

It's okay.

Chaos brings a hand up and very awkwardly pats Zagreus on the head. The gesture is so sweet and unreal that Zagreus starts laughing between his quiet sobs. The gratitude he feels is so potent, it threatens to drown him.

He wants to ask Chaos for a hug—he has vague memories of being held when everything was pain and confusion—but then the embarrassment hits full force and he bites his lips, keeping the words in.

He can always ask for a hug later.

Zagreus takes another moment to compose himself, drying his tears. He looks up at Chaos and says, "Well, I'm gonna go test my new freedom. I guess I'll see you later?"

"Yes. I will be waiting for your return."

Zagreus smiles at them.

He imagines a gate opening up above him, the same one Chaos uses when they wish to see him. It works, even though

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the gate itself is wobbly, like it's struggling to maintain its form. Clearly, he's going to have to work on the things he materializes. It won't do to have them collapse on him because he can't keep them stable enough to function.

He tries to float for a long, long minute, but apparently that's beyond his capabilities right now. Quite disappointing.

Instead, he brings the gate closer and climbs up. "Alright, Master Chaos. See you soon!"

Chaos doesn't answer, but Zagreus feels the goodbye they don't say. He closes his eyes and surrenders himself to the smoke-like energy around him. Half a second later, and he's greeted by an empty chamber.

He's in Tartarus.

Somewhere, something snaps back into place, like the universe is rearranging itself. He feels it weave around him, touch him and float away, like it's reconciling what it knew of him and what he is now. If he concentrates hard enough, forcing his mind to think outside his physical boundaries, he can see the shimmer in the air. Fine, silken threads fill the chamber, crossing walls and ground and ceiling, their paths unknown.

Far away from where he is, a presence catches the edge of his attention, almost too far for him to notice. It feels a little cool to the touch, something dark and gentle. It's walking around, slowly, methodically. As if looking for something. It doesn't seem like it's aware of him yet, and Zagreus disconnects before it can latch onto his presence.

He has no desire to know who it is. (Lies.)

He has no desire to be found. (More lies.)

Zagreus looks around the chamber and wonders how he's

going to get out. Chaos had said that he could pass undetected, but he's got a feeling that would require tapping into his newfound powers with gusto, broadcasting his presence to everyone able to feel it.

So that's a no.

The sound of the Styx, a permanent fixture in all the chambers between the House and the outside, catches his ear, and he has a sudden thought. He wriggles his fingers, wondering how much power he can unleash before he becomes a beacon. He just needs a little bit, just enough to not be pulled along with the current.

His skin tingles as he envisions it, as he thinks, *you can't touch me; not anymore.*

Then he jumps into the river and waits.

He floats there for a few seconds and watches as the strong current tries to take him in the direction of the House. But it can't. The water curves around him, like any body of water would, but then it almost looks like it turns back around when it realizes it doesn't have him in its grasp. Zagreus has the impression that, if the river were sentient, it would have huffed in frustration, pouting as it continues on. The arms of uncountable damned souls try to grab him too, but they simply pass through him.

He can't help the chuckle that escapes him. Misusing the Styx has become one of his favorite things to do down here.

He dives in, surprised that he can now see under the red water with incredible detail and accuracy. The fish are even more numerous than he expected, and he can even see some plants in the shallow parts of the river floor. The Styx is teeming with life and the irony is not lost on him.

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He wants to know what's deeper down, wants to explore it fully now that he's capable of doing it without being swept away, but there's no time for that. He needs to get out of Tartarus, and the Underworld as a whole as fast as he can. The longer he stays here, the bigger the chances of someone seeing him. Gossip spreads like fire because people have nothing better to do down here, and by the time he gets to the door, his father could already be there.

And Zagreus really doesn't want to fight.

So he swims against the current, putting a little bit of godly speed into it, and makes his way upstream.

The only way to know where he's going is by paying attention to temperature and lighting; he doesn't want to risk being seen by popping his head out of the water. He knows when he's passing through Asphodel because everything gets hotter, suffocatingly so, and then Elysium is obvious by the way the temperature drops far below the normal threshold, cool like how he imagines a river in spring might feel.

He recognizes the Temple by the change in lighting, everything getting redder and darker. And then, finally, the outside, as the water clears out. He wants to jump out right then and there, eager to see the surface without his impending death, but he keeps going just a little longer.

No matter what, he makes sure to go far enough up the river that there's no way he's anywhere near his mother's cottage.

A few minutes later, the excitement gets to be too much, so he slowly pops his head out of the water and takes a look. He's in the middle of nowhere, essentially. All he sees is water, rocks and trees.

Perfect.



Back in the House of Hades, Hypnos is busying himself by doodling on the margins of his latest report. He's late with it, but half of the information is still incomplete because Hypnos can't bring himself to work. Every time he tries, his mind offers up scenarios where Zagreus could be in trouble and waiting for help, and Hypnos gets distracted and anxious and tries desperately to maintain his work smile in front of everyone.

During a lull in the white noise around him, he flips through the pages to look at the latest deaths, half curious and half expectant.

If the ledger didn't float on its own, it would have clattered to the ground.

There, in cursive handwriting, is Zagreus' name.

Status: dead. Cause of death: blank.

It's blank. It's *blank*.

What?

"What?" he whispers, too low to be heard amidst the normal commotion in the main hall.

How can it be blank? Cause of death has never, ever been blank. The Death Ledger knows how every being on this planet has died. When Lord Hades is responsible for Zagreus' demise, the ledger still tries to write it down, even when it gets thwarted by the magic Lord Hades himself possesses.

But it tries, because whatever material the Fates made this thing with, it's one of the most powerful tools Hypnos has seen in his long life.

And it's blank.

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Whatever killed Zagreus is strong enough to erase itself from the ledger.

Hypnos is not used to being frightened, because gods of his station have very little to fear. Yet the chill that runs down his spine is so strong, so distracting, that his feet touch the ground for a second, before habit makes him float again.

Zagreus is dead. Killed by something unknown.

He knew it! He knew Zagreus was in trouble. Whatever happened must have been really bad. Maybe he had been captured after all, held prisoner in some capacity, unable to ask for help.

The fear wars with relief, though, because Zagreus being dead is actually a good thing. All Hypnos has to do now is wait a few minutes, and the Styx will deliver him right at the House's doorstep. Hypnos considers calling Thanatos and telling him the news, but he must have felt Zagreus die. He'll be here any moment now.

Which means he's going to have to watch two of his favorite people chew each other out, unable to pick a side lest he makes it worse.

But that's a small price to pay for knowing that Zagreus is safe, for having him here, where Hypnos can keep an eye on him.

So he curls up with his blanket and waits.



And waits.



Zagreus never shows up.



"What do you mean, he hasn't shown up?" Thanatos' voice is uncharacteristically loud.

Hypnos doesn't like the way it attracts the attention of the shades around them. He can see them whispering to each other and knows the gossip will spread very fast. Everyone already knew that Zagreus was missing. And now everyone will know he's dead, and that he's not where he's supposed to be.

"Ah, Thanatos, maybe lower your voice a little? There's no need to shout, I'm right here!"

Thanatos looks properly chastised for a split second, before his anger takes over again. He sends a glare in the shades' direction and a few of them cower in fear, moving away. "This is ridiculous! What is he doing?"

"May— maybe he got lost along the way?" As soon as the words leave his mouth, Hypnos cringes.

Thanatos turns his unimpressed glare on Hypnos. "Souls don't get lost. They have no choice but to come here. You're sure that he's dead?"

"Well, the ledger has never malfunctioned before!"

Thanatos rips the ledger out of the air, making Hypnos wince. Thanatos always gets rough when he's angry, but at least he's never taken it out on Hypnos. Better a piece of magic wood than him.

Thanatos' eyes scan the page where Zagreus' latest death is inked in impeccable penmanship. "How can this thing be blank? I thought it was supposed to record any death?"

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"It is! But some things can bypass it if they're strong enough. Lord Hades does that every time he kills—"

Thanatos interrupts Hypnos by slapping a hand over his mouth. "Not so loud, Hypnos. People don't need to know that."

Now look who's talking. Hypnos is tempted to glare back at him for the hypocrisy, but he doesn't want to evolve the situation into a siblings' spat.

He takes Thanatos' hand off of his face. "If Lord Hades is bold enough to kill his own son, he should be bold enough to let his name show up beside the deed," Hypnos whispers, making sure to enunciate the words carefully, leaving no room for Thanatos to misunderstand them.

The affronted look he gets in return is worth it.

He's not usually one to get satisfaction out of such petty things, but the fact that Lord Hades can mess with something that should be neutral has rubbed Hypnos wrong since the first time he read [redacted] beside Zagreus' name. He had been understandably confused and frustrated. The look on Zagreus' face when he came out of the pool had been enough to morph those feelings into gut-wrenching worry.

That Lord Hades refuses to acknowledge any part of the situation is frustrating, first because Hypnos doesn't like the prideful person that Lord Hades is, and second because he doesn't enjoy when that pride hurts people he cares about.

"You need to be careful of the things you say inside this house, brother," Thanatos whispers back, anger coloring his tone. (And maybe a hint of fear?)

Hypnos smiles and ignores that comment. "So! Like I was saying before you interrupted me, the ledger is very powerful, as it should be, since it was a gift from our sisters. But some

things can bypass it, though not many. In fact"—Hypnos lifts two fingers—"I only know two. The one I just mentioned and the one that apparently killed Zagreus this time."

The fact that Hypnos only found out about this lapse in security because Zagreus can't sit still and stay alive for very long is exactly the type of gruesomely dark, but funny fact that Zagreus would enjoy knowing.

Hypnos would love to tell him.

Zagreus just needs to come back.

Hypnos' words seem to have struck something in Thanatos, though. His glare subsides, voice changing to something that could be worry. "So what are you saying?"

Honestly, Hypnos doesn't want to say it out loud. It feels like it will become too real, like something they won't be able to fight. But... his eyes stray to the ledger still in Thanatos' grip, his knuckles white. But it's already as real as it gets for them, isn't it?

"I'm saying whatever killed Zagreus is powerful enough to avoid detection of divine tools... it stands to reason that they're powerful enough to hold his soul." Hypnos' lips tremble without his permission. "They might be preventing him from resurrecting."

The silence that follows is telling. Thanatos' face is set in stone, expression carefully blank. He's worried, but doesn't want to seem like he is. Hypnos would say it's a waste of energy, to pretend as such, but he's also been maintaining a fake smile for a week now, making sure no one sees the cracks widening under his happy facade.

"I'll see what I can find. Maybe Mother knows something," Thanatos says, blinking away without waiting for an answer.

Hypnos can't find the energy to be sad about that.

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There's not much for him to do at the moment, so he stares at the far wall, unseeing. Since finding Zagreus' name in the ledger, he's been carefully maintaining all his thoughts in neat little boxes, where they can't spring up and catch him by surprise. He knows that strategy won't last long; at some point the thoughts will escape and Hypnos will have to deal with whatever horrific idea his mind came up with, but he's hoping to do that after Zagreus is safe and sound inside the House again.

Maybe Zagreus finally left. Finally found a way out. Maybe he just didn't care enough to let you know, the little dark voice at the back of his mind says.

Hypnos is usually very adept at ignoring it... but the words have a truth to it, somehow.

He quickly shoves that thought into a box.

"Master Hypnos!"

The voice startles him, and he looks up to see Dusa descending from the rafters with her usual uncanny speed. She looks harried, but Dusa always looks harried, so that doesn't say much.

"Master Hypnos, I— forgive my impertinence, but— do— do you have any news on His Highness?" She shifts from side to side, her snakes shaking, as if they want to spring onto something or someone. "I'm just really worried, I'm sorry to bother you with this!"

Hypnos does his best to force a smile for her. "Ah, no, it's okay! It's natural to worry, he's never been away so long, right?"

Dusa nods in her own little way, bobbing up and down fast. "Yeah! I— I know he's been playing around more than usual, with the whole escape thing, and Meg commented that he wasn't showing up to fight her even before he disappeared. But

he always passes through here on his way back so I thought you might have heard something or maybe he told you somet—"

Wow, is that how he sounds like when he's anxious and info dumping on Zagreus? No wonder he asked Hypnos to take a moment to breathe, that can definitely be pretty overwhelming.

Dusa is still talking, getting more nervous seemingly every second, so Hypnos interrupts her.

"Uhm, Dusa, it's okay. I don't mind answering your questions, I just... wish I had a better answer for you."

She freezes then, large eyes trained on him, worry swimming inside them.

"He's... well. He's dead. He died some hours ago, so he should have been here by now... and, as you can see, no Zag."

Just saying those words sends another pang of worry through Hypnos and, by the gods, is it too much to hope that Zagreus would just come back so he won't have to feel like this anymore? A week is far too long.

"Oh. Uhm, okay. And you don't have any idea where he might be?"

Oh, how he wishes he did.

"No. Sorry, Dusa."

"No, it's okay! It's not your fault at all! I know you do your best, Master Hypnos! Thank you for indulging me," she says, deflating. Her snakes fall slightly, as if holding themselves upright is too much effort.

"Of course. If I have any news, I'll let you know, alright?"

"Thank you so much, Master Hypnos. If you'll excuse me, I'll go back to work now!"

And then she's off as fast as she came, disappearing through

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the rafters a little less smoothly than normal.

It dawns on Hypnos that other people may eventually approach him to ask about Zagreus, since he's indeed one of the people who see him most frequently. Just the idea of having this conversation, every time, with numerous different people is enough to quicken his breath.

He briefly touches a hand to his face, eyes closing in a silent plea to himself to not lose composure in the middle of the hall.

For now all he can do is keep an eye out for Zagreus. Hopefully Thanatos or their mom will have something substantial by the end of the day, then they can go get Zagreus back and Hypnos won't feel so suffocated anymore.



Mom has no idea of where Zagreus could be.

Hypnos tries not to let the disappointment show on his face. If there's anyone who could have tracked Zagreus anywhere, it was Mom, and she can't find him.

The woman who gave Zagreus the spark of life can't find him.

That shouldn't be possible. If what Hypnos has deduced about Zagreus is true—and he's pretty sure it is—Mom gave Zagreus a little piece of her own essence when he was born, to restart the life that had been taken away.

She's essentially his birth mother too, in a roundabout way. She should be able to find him *anywhere*.

But.

"I cannot find him. I cannot see him—I cannot *feel* him anywhere," Mom says, voice and face impassive, and only

centuries of knowing her let Hypnos know that she's worried, too.

"Uhm, Mom— I mean, Mother... have you tried looking beyond this plane?"

"I have, yes," she answers, and Hypnos tries not to wince at the change in her tone.

It's not that he thinks she's incompetent, gods, of course not. It's just that they usually don't have to worry about other planes because few creatures can access them, so it's not the first place anyone would look.

But it's been a long day of no Zagreus, and Hypnos can feel himself reaching his wits' end.

It's embarrassing, really, to be so worried when other people don't show it as much. Thanatos is still more angry than worried, Mom is definitely worried but composed, Megaera just seemed annoyed when he saw her in the lounge, Lord Hades hasn't shown anything at all, and Dusa is worried but still doing her job dutifully.

Hypnos is the only one who seems to be having a hard time focusing.

Well, him and Cerberus.

The helldog has been morose all week, whining every time someone mentions Zagreus' name within his hearing. He's refused to play fetch with Hypnos or Dusa, and even Lord Hades has been having a hard time getting him to obey any orders.

Maybe Cerberus is just as Zagreus-starved as Hypnos doesn't want to admit he is. Or maybe Cerberus, just like Hypnos, knows that something's going on, even when no one seems to take him seriously.

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"I've been looking through every dream I possibly can, but no mortal seems to have seen him, or anything strange," Hypnos says, ashamed that he can't offer anything better. He really doubts any mortal would have any information about Zagreus at all, but at this point, short of going to the surface and looking for himself, there's not much Hypnos can do.

"What's the point of looking through mortals' dreams? I doubt they would have any information," Thanatos says, annoyed tone firmly in place.

Yes, brother, thank you. What would I do without you here to tell me how useless I am every time?

Hypnos hides a wince at his own thoughts, but the way Nyx glances at him tell him she knows exactly what's going through his mind.

Mom does know him very well, even when he wishes she didn't.

"Children, focus. Keep doing what each of you can do. I will... try something else, and see if I can get any result."

"What are you going to try, Mo—mother?"

"...I'll see if I can talk to my parent."

Hypnos' eyes widen in surprise. He hasn't seen Grandparent Chaos in centuries, not since they and Mom had a falling out. Mom never willingly talks about them, so the fact that she's genuinely planning on talking to them now...

Oh, Mom is really worried, isn't she?

It shouldn't come as a surprise. Even when finding Persephone was a small, improbable possibility, Mom went out of her way to help Zagreus. The mirror, the weapons in the courtyard that Hypnos knew Lord Hades had never approved of, Charon himself (even if his older brother would've been

more than willing to cheat others of their obols anyway), the Olympians...

If Mom hadn't helped, Zagreus' goal would never have been achieved.

Hypnos knows she loves Zagreus like a son, and for a time when they were little, Hypnos had been incredibly jealous.

But then he grew up and understood that Mom loving Zagreus didn't have anything to do with whether she loved Hypnos or not.

Which she did.

...He was pretty sure she did.

It's understandable, really. Who doesn't love Zagreus? A lot of people around the House do, even when they pretend otherwise.

(One of the perks of being someone people look at and dismiss instantly is that Hypnos ends up being privy to a lot of conversations he wouldn't otherwise be. The perks of being invisible, he supposes.)

"Do you really believe Grandparent Chaos would help us, Mother?" Thanatos asks.

"I do not know, but it's worth a try. If anyone is privy to the secrets of the Underworld and beyond, it's them."

Thanatos sighs. "I hope you're right. I will keep looking as well. Megaera will be employing her sisters, so we might have some good information soon." He looks at Hypnos. "Hypnos, you... you keep doing what you're doing, and don't forget to keep an eye out on the pool and—"

"Yes, Thanatos, I know. You don't need to tell me what to do, surprising as that may be to you."

A silence follows his statement. It takes Hypnos a few

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seconds to realize he not only interrupted Thanatos, but snapped at him. His first instinct is to apologize, and he opens his mouth to do just that... but then he stops.

He doesn't apologize.

Thanatos is looking at him with clear surprise on his face, something in his eyes that Hypnos can't quite identify. It might be offense, or anger, or the baseline irritation that always radiates from him whenever he has to stay too close to Hypnos for too long. Hypnos searches within himself and finds out he's quite disinterested in the answer, which is a novel feeling that he may need to come back to later and analyze.

Right now, though, he feels Mom's eyes on him, so he turns to her.

"Ah, Mom— I mean, Mother! I'll go back to the House now and keep an eye on things, of course, and if you could let me know how your conversation with Gran Chaos goes, that would be lovely, okay bye!"

He poofs out before she can answer, but not without seeing the surprise on her face as he leaves. Phasing away from her domain and back to the House, he teleports directly to his post and scares a group of shades nearby. Absentmindedly, he thinks he should probably apologize, but other things are more important right now.

He suppresses a wave of embarrassment when he realizes he said *Gran Chaos* out loud, as if he's still a little child in awe of their otherworldly grandparent. Instead, he focuses on the fact that he was as rude to Thanatos as Thanatos is to him on a daily basis, and it felt...

Well, it felt good.

Hypnos doesn't usually feel good, so the feeling is welcome,

even as he dreads the repercussions.

But he can worry about them later.

He snuggles down on the couch (the couch Zagreus bought to make him more comfortable during his job—oh gods stop thinking about it and focus) and goes to sleep. It's the middle of the day on the surface, but a lot of mortals are asleep right now, and looking for any scrap of information is more important than keeping an eye on a queue full of souls.

They have eternity to wait, anyway.



Three months.

In a god's existence, three months is nothing. It's a blink of an eye, a brief rest, perhaps; hardly a length of time worth noticing.

These three months without knowing if Zagreus is safe have been the longest three months of Hypnos' long life.

He's heard mortals saying that you never know how much you can miss someone until they're gone, and Hypnos had never quite understood that until now. He's never had any reason to miss people; sure, he misses being close to Thanatos, misses being able to talk with Megaera without feeling the disdain emanating from her, misses being able to hide in Mom's domain when things become too much.

But they're still here, where he can see them periodically, even when Thanatos spends days away. So he's never had to actually miss them.

He misses Zagreus terribly.

He misses his voice, soft even when frustrated; his laugh,

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rarely boisterous, usually shy and small, like he's not sure he should be laughing at all. He misses the way Zagreus' feet left a little trail wherever he went, even as the House repaired itself right behind him. (He misses his eyes, and his smile, and his strong hands, and the way the ugly yellow light of the House shone on his hair—)

The blend of worrying for Zagreus' safety and missing him is a strange feeling, and it leaves Hypnos wrong-footed. He hasn't been able to do his job well, and the only thing still holding up is his godly duties. He's still keeping a careful eye on mortal dreams, and even some immortal ones, when he can get away with it.

He's certain that some of them miss Zagreus too, given what they dream, and it only adds to the strangled, mixed up feelings in his chest.

Searches have been in vain, even as their efforts continue. Thanatos and the Furies have been tasked with searching the surface, and Hypnos even managed to ask Charon to ask Hermes to ask the Olympians about it. No stone in the Underworld has been left unturned by now, and with the servants of the House working overtime, soon they will have searched the whole of Greece as well.

Gods, even Lord Hades has started to look a little bit worried, and that just brings home how serious the situation is.

Hypnos wonders, sometimes, if Persephone is worried at all, that her son hasn't shown up in months.

Then he wonders what happened between them to put that look on Zagreus' face. Wonders if she said something to him, if that fateful day was when things truly began to change. Wonders if Persephone was the catalyst for all of this.

And then he needs to stop wondering for a while, lest he directs his anger and frustration at her.

He doesn't know what happened, and it would be unfair to blame it all on her. (And still, anger bubbles beneath the surface, and his fists shake every time he remembers Zagreus' expression.)

Hypnos sighs. Getting angry at people who aren't even here is a waste of his energy. He doesn't want to replicate Thanatos' behavior, who's been snapping at people more than usual, unleashing his anger not only on Hypnos but on Dusa too, and on one memorable occasion, on Megaera.

Not that Megaera didn't deserve it; she had implied that Thanatos wasn't a very good god of death if he couldn't keep tabs on one measly soul. The only reason they didn't come to blows with each other was Lord Hades' incredible glare from his desk, and the way Nyx had peeked through the doorway, expression frosty.

Thanatos and Megaera had parted ways after exactly four seconds of frozen silence, where Hypnos thought they were going to lose control after all.

Thinking back, it's not really a surprise that it's come to this. Megaera has also been angrier, curt answers and glares everywhere, taking her frustration on random shades and on Hypnos.

And also on Dusa, just once, and the expression on Dusa's face could have broken any heart.

It took Megaera a week to be forgiven.

So Thanatos and Megaera barely look each other in the eye now, and Hypnos has learned to not mention one to the other, on the rare occasion he talks to one of them.

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Mom is keeping the same calm front she's always had, but Hypnos can see the cracks in her armor. She's been unable to contact Gran Chaos, and her searches through the web of chthonic energy have all been in vain.

Of course she can't find him, because he's—

He cuts off the dark voice before it can utter the nagging little thought that's been threatening Hypnos' sanity. Now's not the time to be pessimistic, or to let his worry get in the way of searching, of getting results.

Now's not the time to fall into despair. (Hypnos is deeply afraid that if he falls, he's never getting back up.)

He goes back to work, nevermind that he barely accomplishes anything anymore.



Exactly eight months after Zagreus' disappearance, he fights with Thanatos.

In the hall.

In front of everyone.

Hypnos' day starts as they all have lately; full of worry and with barely any energy to do anything but feed that worry, while pretending everything's okay.

But then Thanatos teleports right in front of Hypnos, seemingly unaware of where he is. He looks murderous, but that's nothing new.

Hypnos greets him anyway—stupidly. “Thanatos, hello.”

It's more subdued than he would like, but it's the new normal around the House. Being cheerful and loud almost feels impolite. Everyone, even the shades, have adopted the new

sullen tone, and the hall now is filled with whispers and shifty eyes, instead of the bustling of months ago.

Thanatos looks at him with a smidge of surprise, his eyes rapidly scanning his surroundings, and Hypnos sees the moment his brother realizes where he is and who's talking to him.

Thanatos nods, but doesn't say anything.

Hypnos stares at him. He would usually ask what's wrong, but he has no real desire for conversation, especially not with his brother, so he stays quiet.

Thanatos frowns at him. "What?" he asks in a cold tone.

Hypnos shrugs. "Nothing."

"You're staring."

"You're right in front of me."

"Tsk, just say what you want to say, Hypnos."

"What makes you think I wanna say anything?"

"You can never shut up. You expect me to believe it's gonna start now?"

Hypnos grits his teeth, frustration rising. "Sometimes I can be quiet. Shocking, I know."

"Quiet, you? Ha."

"Well, perhaps I just don't wanna say anything to *you*."

Uh oh.

Thanatos narrows his eyes, turning his body towards Hypnos. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've never been a good conversationalist, brother."

"That's rich, coming from you."

"Well, at least I can maintain a conversation without insulting someone or teleporting away when I don't know what to say."

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He should shut up now.

“Teleporting away is better than talking someone’s ears off with your drivel.”

Ouch.

“Maybe so, but at least it’s less rude.”

A few shades have stopped to stare at them. Hypnos barely resists the urge to squirm under their gaze.

Thanatos steps closer. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“What the fuck is *your* problem?”

Oh gods, what are they doing?

“My problem is that while I’ve been stretched thin trying to do my duties and search for Zagreus, you’ve been here doing nothing!”

“I also have my duties, Thanatos, but they keep me in the House. Or would you rather I left everything here to go search with you?”

“You barely do your job at all. Maybe you *should* go out there and search. Oh no, wait, I forgot. You’re searching through dreams, right? Because it’s very effective.”

“Ah yes, because you being unable to find one dead person is much better, isn’t it?”

“I’m doing what I can!”

“So am I!”

“The only thing you do is stand here and act like an idiot!”—Thanatos uncrosses his arms, hands balled into fists—“I can barely look at your face, it makes me so angry.”

“You’ve never made it a habit of looking at me at all, so I guess nothing’s changed on that front.”

Hypnos is pretty sure he sees Achilles watching them from the corner of his eye, and shame rises in his chest.

He and Thanatos are close to each other now, upper bodies leaning ever closer. Hypnos is clutching his feather so tight that it would have broken if it weren't magical. He has no idea where the ledger is.

"The problem is that you're too needy, Hypnos! People can't keep coddling you!"

"No one has coddled me in a long time!" And that hurts to admit.

"And yet you still haven't learned."

"Learned what? To be a cold bastard like you?"

Thanatos grabs the front of his chiton, pulling him closer still. Their noses almost touch.

It takes a huge effort not to close a hand around Thanatos' arm. Or his throat.

"At least I don't follow Zag around with my eyes like a lovesick puppy."

And now Hypnos does grab his arm, because how dare he? How dare he reveal Hypnos' feelings to everyone, and even worse, mock them?

"Don't you fucking dare mock my feelings. It's not my fault that you can't bother to be a pleasant person." Hypnos tightens his grip and feels a dark satisfaction when Thanatos winces. "If Zagreus doesn't look at you the way you want him to, that's your problem."

Thanatos' eyes flash with some buried fury, voice rising. "What are you insinuating?"

Instead of flinching back as he normally would, Hypnos rises to meet him. "You know damn well *what*."

"Children."

It's a voice Hypnos is intimately familiar with, but its tone is

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one he hasn't heard in a long time.

They both look to the side, where their mother stands a few paces away. Hypnos immediately lets go of Thanatos when he registers the look on her face.

A shiver runs down his spine.

The embarrassment Hypnos was suppressing comes in full force as Mom takes a single step forward, though at least Thanatos finally lets him go and backs away, looking at the ground.

No one speaks or moves.

"If both of you are quite done, I suggest going back to your duties. *Now*," Mom says, voice like dark ice.

Thanatos teleports to wherever he usually goes, like the coward he is.

Hypnos winces internally as his Mom throws him a last glacial stare and turns around, leaving the hall. She doesn't go to her usual post, and soon Hypnos loses sight of her.

Looking around, he realizes the whole hall has stopped to gape at them, even Lord Hades. Except Lord Hades isn't gaping; that would be unbecoming of him. But he's also not glaring at Hypnos, like he expected it.

No. Instead, Lord Hades looks almost... tired. Resigned.

...As if he's suddenly realizing what not having Zagreus around is doing to his House.

Hypnos quickly goes over the last months and makes a quick tally of fights that almost broke out and, sure enough, there's been a lot of them.

He didn't think he would be part of one, though.

He sighs, feeling his face heat up.

Well, that happened.

Thanatos didn't say anything that Hypnos doesn't already think of himself. He is quite useless in searching for Zagreus, and he does talk too much, and probably inconveniences people a lot, and he also would like to be coddled, because wanting affection is natural and he's way less emotionally constipated than Thanatos and—

Ah.

Alright.

Deep breaths.

Breathe, Hypnos. The poor imitation of Zagreus' voice that his mind provides almost brings him to his knees.

He claps his hands, crushing his feather a little. "Alright, everyone, show's over! Thank you for coming, please be on your way now."

The shades start slowly moving away, some of them looking back over their shoulder. The whispers are many, so it's guaranteed that soon the whole of Tartarus will know what happened.

Honestly, Hypnos is not even worried about that.

He's worried that his Mom may never want to talk to him again, after embarrassing her like that. Granted, being able to put Thanatos in his place for once felt good. Really good.

(He's mostly thankful, though, that Mom intervened. Hypnos doesn't like thinking that he could have seriously hurt Thanatos.)

As the hall clears of curious shades, Hypnos thinks of going back to work, if only for some distraction—even though work is synonymous to anxiety and tension and too many eyes on him at all times. But then someone calls him.

"Ah, Master Hypnos, if I may."

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Hypnos turns around, unable to hide the surprise on his face. No one calls him Master Hypnos, except for Dusa and Achilles.

Achilles stands a meter or so away from Hypnos with a tight expression, and he immediately knows the subject of their conversation. And no, it's not the almost-fight that Achilles just witnessed.

He wishes he were as rude as Thanatos, so he could teleport away to run from unwanted conversations.

Instead, he smiles, knowing full well he doesn't fool Achilles.

"Achilles, I already told you there's no need to call me that. I'm no Master or anything."

"But it is a matter of respect, Master Hypnos. You are above my station, after all," Achilles says, face set in worry, but voice soft as always.

They've had this argument hundreds of times already. Some part of Hypnos thinks they argue mostly to have something to do. Hypnos is sure he's not the only one who gets bored with his eternal tasks.

"So you always say. What can I help you with? Looking for someone?"

He meant to ask if Achilles was looking for a specific shade that may have arrived—never mind that Achilles has been dead for centuries and probably isn't waiting for anyone to die—but instead, he realizes too late the way his question touches on the sore subject floating between them. Reality slams into Hypnos again. Gods, he says the stupidest things sometimes.

He sees the way it affects Achilles as well; he grimaces, hands tightening their hold on his spear.

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

Achilles always keeps his composure, and Hypnos admires him for it. He only hopes Achilles doesn't think him a big fool.

"I was wondering... I know it's been a long while, and—well— I was going to ask if you had any news about Zagreus, but I suppose the fight was a pretty good sign that you don't."

Hypnos sighs. "No, I don't. I'm sorry."

Achilles' expression doesn't change. "Ah, just as I thought. I didn't have much hope of a positive answer, anyway. I try to keep an ear out for it, but I figured I could ask directly."

Hypnos thinks that's the end of the conversation, but then Achilles' body suddenly tenses up. He leans forward on his spear, probably looking casual to an outsider, but his face says something else.

"I had a couple of hours with him, right before he... disappeared. We drank together at the lounge, and I... I suppose I was careless."

Hypnos shivers slightly, uncertain of where this is going. "What do you mean, careless?"

"The lad was acting a little bit weird, I think. During the last few years he'd gotten better at being himself with me. But when we were drinking... I think he was trying too hard to be 'himself'."

"Achilles, what do you mean?"

"At the time I didn't think anything of it. Zagreus had these moments where he thought he needed to act a certain way with me, even though I told him I'm not"—Achilles looks around—"his father and I didn't expect anything of him except for him maybe being comfortable in my presence, but sometimes he got caught in acting like a... well, like a spoiled little prince, if you will." He shifts, rearranging himself as if nervous.

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“And?”

“So I didn’t think anything of it at the time. But now... considering how long he’s been away and how he seems to have talked to other people around the same time he talked to me... I think he knew, Master Hypnos.” Achilles looks at Hypnos with the weight of centuries in his eyes; a tired man who has seen too much. “I think he knew he was leaving, and he was saying goodbye.”

...

...

It’s not like—

It’s not like Hypnos hasn’t thought about it.

He has.

So much.

He has run all the possibilities through his mind, again and again. Zagreus could have been hurt in battle and someone took advantage of it. An Olympian got a little too greedy and breached the Underworld to get the prince. An unfortunate accident with one of Zagreus’ Infernal Weapons in the middle of an empty chamber, where no one would be able to help.

Zagreus running away.

Zagreus killing himself.

He’s thought of it all, and he’s also been doing nothing but ruminating on all the memories he has.

Zagreus standing at the edge of the pool, staring at the ground with a far away look on his face.

Zagreus looking at Hypnos like he was surprised that someone seemed happy to see him.

Zagreus’ expression almost crumbling under the weight of something unseen, and then smiling like nothing was out of

place.

His refusal to keep up the escape attempts.

His silence about Persephone.

His insistence in taking Hypnos away from work so they could spend a few hours together.

The way his face had contorted into something incredibly sad when they parted ways.

It's not like Hypnos hasn't thought about it. He has done nothing *but* think about it, and every time he reruns a memory through his mind, every little detail seems to come together a little more, like tiny puzzle pieces moving very slowly to their designated places.

And those pieces have started to form a picture Hypnos doesn't want to see.

Because if he does... if he allows himself to back up and see the whole forest instead of each tree, Hypnos will have to acknowledge that Zagreus had looked like he wanted to run away. Like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

And he will have to acknowledge that Zagreus may have succeeded in running away in the most horrible way possible.

Zagreus may have managed to die. Permanently.

So... if you forced enough power into someone's mind, you could essentially drive them mad? Zagreus had asked, a strange, out of place curiosity in his voice, and Hypnos had thought nothing of it at the time besides a simple question, but now it makes so much sense and by the gods how had he not realized that something was wrong why would Zagreus not say anything even though they hadn't actually been close since they were children because Hypnos was always busy with his stupid job that he didn't even like and maybe he had left Zagreus alone

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when he should have stayed close—

He's shaken out of his spiral by a hand on his shoulder, firm and heavy. Achilles is looking at him with open worry now, and some shades are whispering in a corner.

"Master Hypnos, are you alright?"

Hypnos can't help it; he laughs.

It comes out sounding dry and incredulous, and he has a hard time reconciling it with what he knows is his usual tone. It doesn't last long, though the shades in the corner look alarmed. One of them moves away, probably eager to spread the gossip around, and Hypnos doesn't care.

It's hard to find the energy to care about anything these days, really.

(The black hole inside his chest swells like a predator who just had a satisfying dinner.)

"No, Achilles. I don't think I am."

Hypnos hasn't been okay in a long, long time.

Achilles doesn't seem like he has anything to say to that. They stare at each other for a moment, Hypnos wondering if one of them will be brave enough to say it out loud.

There's that weight in Achilles' eyes again, the one that tells of loss. Hypnos has seen it in a few shades over the centuries, the ones that are strong enough to keep a sense of themselves when they die. Some of them have that far away look, the one that tells of too many things for one person alone to bear. It had taken him a few years to understand what that look entails, to learn how to recognize it so he can give its owners an extra gentle smile when they show up.

Achilles has always had that look, for things and people that were already gone when he was alive. And now he has that look

again, even though he's dead and shouldn't have to worry about things like that.

Because Achilles knows, doesn't he?

He has accepted what no one has been willing to say so far.

What Hypnos hasn't allowed himself to think in clear terms.

Achilles knows Zagreus is...

Achilles knows.

Probably has known for a while.

Maybe being mortal for the first part of his life gave him a perspective that Hypnos and the other immortals in the House are lacking. Achilles is probably the only one here who's prepared to deal with death at all.

And isn't that ironic, when one of Hypnos' brothers is the embodiment of the very thing that took Zagreus away?

Oh.

Oh.

Zagreus is dead, isn't he?

The thought completes its shape before Hypnos can make it go away. It glues itself on the walls of his mind, refusing to budge, screaming *think me*. It has been screaming for months. Hypnos just didn't want to hear it, because acknowledging its voice would have been acknowledging its content.

Because Zagreus is dead.

Not dead as in having lost his physical body, like all the shades Hypnos welcomes into the House every day.

No, not like that.

Zagreus is dead as in *not here anymore*. As in *gone*. As in *forever out of Hypnos' grasp*.

Dead. Dead in a way few things can truly be.

Hypnos is used to death. His twin brother is the master of it.

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He sees the dead everyday, welcomes them to the Underworld with a smile that he hopes is comforting, coaxing them into a neat queue that eventually moves forward, leading them away to their eternal places.

Hypnos is not a being that needs to worry about death, though. He's never had to before, and always thought he would never have to in the future.

And yet.

Zagreus is dead.

Zagreus is gone.

Oh.

Something wet and golden falls on Hypnos' hand. It slides down his skin and splashes against the page under it, soaking the paper and leaving a golden stain behind.

"Ah, Master Hypnos... perhaps you should take a break?"

Achilles' words should make sense. Hypnos is sure they do.

He just can't seem to grasp them right at this moment.

More golden liquid falls, sliding down his cheeks and falling on his lips, and then past his chin. Whatever's written on the paper in the ledger quickly becomes unintelligible as the tears soak through, smudging the ink and leaving behind little pools and rivers of gold.

Hypnos hasn't moved, but the usual noises from the hall vanish from his ears. They seem far, as if Hypnos is walking away from them, even though he's still as a floating statue.

Achilles is talking, Hypnos can see his lips moving, but no sound's coming out.

Or maybe it is, it's just that Hypnos doesn't hear it.

He thinks of the field of poppies he never got to show Zagreus. (Never got the courage to invite him into his domain,

because why would the Prince of the Underworld want to see a field of flowers, right?)

His body shudders, his metaphysical wings fluttering in the wind of his world falling down around him. His other pair of eyes, the one he never uses on the physical plane, snaps open, turning his vision double. For a split second Hypnos sees beyond the walls of the House, beyond the shapes that everything needs to take to exist here.

One moment he's there, and then he isn't. He leaves behind Achilles' startled face and a lot of unfinished work.

His whole being is moving without his conscious consent, stepping out of the Underworld's plane and into the web of paths that he can only grasp when he taps into his chthonic powers. It's a matter of half a second to step into his domain, and Hypnos only really registers what he's done when he floats down and his feet touch the ground.

It's the middle of the day, and the sky is a sea of light purples and pinks, no clouds in sight. The white trees gleam under a sun that never appears, and at his feet his poppies sway gently in the breeze.

The field extends to infinity, the amount of poppies impossible to count.

They are red like the blood in Zagreus' veins, like the clothes he wears.

Hypnos has always thought Zagreus looks good in red.

Looked. *Looked* good in red.

Oh.

Hypnos wanted to give him a poppy.

Just one.

He always indulged in imagining Zagreus might put it in his

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hair, or in his belt, or maybe on one of the dog skulls. (A small part of him feared that Zagreus would crush it under his feet, uncaring for the little flower.)

The image of Zagreus with a red poppy in his hair morphs into a hundred poppy petals on the ground, burning feet stomping them, until they morph into a river of blood, and it runs down grey walls and through the floor. In the middle of this grotesque pool is Zagreus' body, devoid of the life that had always seemed so impossible to be snuffed out.

Under Hypnos' feet there's already a small puddle of golden tears, like an imitation of his thoughts.

He falls to the ground, hitting his knees on the soft earth and inadvertently crushing some of the flowers under him.

Is this... is this what grief is? Is this what it's like to *mourn* someone?

He's never had to do this before.

How do mortals handle it?

How do you survive something like this?

Hypnos knows he can't die, but the hand crushing his heart is so strong that for a moment he thinks it will happen anyway, that the weight of this thing is going to crush him under its feet like a fragile little poppy.

The black hole that's been growing steadily bigger inside him, like a hungry animal, gobbles up his despair like it's dessert.

There's a sound in his ear, permeating his domain, filling every corner. It's like someone in the throes of agony, though he's never heard someone sound like that before. It takes Hypnos too long to realize that he's the one making those sounds, something between a scream and a sob that tears out

Razia

of his throat, and if Hypnos had a mortal body he would have ripped his throat open with the force of it.

His tears pool around him from all of his eyes, as his wings curl up and then unfurl, again and again, unable to stay still.

His whole being shakes with the force of the emotions running through him.

Hypnos never wanted to know what grief felt like.



Later, when he regains enough control of himself to sit down properly, to look around and be aware of where he is and what he's doing—even though the tears keep coming—he finds another color of poppies around him.

They're white.



Hypnos doesn't go back to the House.

He spends two days cooped up inside his domain, alternating between crying and staring blankly around him.

The skies turn dark, deep purples and no pink, clouds closing overhead. The threat of a storm lingers, the air feeling electric, the grass smelling of rain. But rain never comes. The clouds just stay there, angry and dark, but they don't offer any release.

The first day he spends there, Hypnos tries to get rid of the white poppies.

He walks around his eternal fields, ripping the white flowers from the earth and crushing them in his two pairs of hands.

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They just keep blooming, now matter how many he destroys.

His tears fall on the petals as he rages a battle against them, and the combination of deep gold and pure white would be beautiful if they didn't represent everything wrong with his life at the moment.

When the second day rolls around, Hypnos gives up.

He's never going to get rid of the white poppies, he knows that. Destroying them is an exercise in futility, an outlet for his anger, a pastime so he doesn't have to think too much.

He sits down beside a tree, leaning his back against the lavender bark. He stares up at the white canopy and can't help but think that now, at least, some of the poppies match the leaves. His lips twitch, a smile wanting to come out, but it dies before it can.

The sky is still dark, threatening rain and never delivering.

Hypnos closes his eyes and considers everything that's happened in the last eight months.

He tallies it all; the fights, the worry, the avenues they've tried, the failures, the way the House looks less and less lively as time goes by. He weighs them against the good memories of before; before something decided to snatch Zagreus from under their noses.

The balance is quite clear.

By the time Hypnos comes to a decision, it doesn't come as a surprise. Somehow he's always known that sooner or later it would come to that, for him.

He just didn't expect the last straw to be something so tragic.

He gathers his thoughts, curling his wings onto himself

again, hiding his true form. His being shifts as it accommodates his usual appearance, only one pair of eyes and one pair of arms and no wings to speak for, except for the lone one on his head.

He grabs the House brooch and considers it for a moment, rolling it around in his hand.

It's a glorified obol, though the symbol of Lord Hades' beard makes it clear to whom it actually belongs, nevermind that Lord Hades has no use for money.

Hypnos crushes it. It crumbles into pieces, and a burst of energy grinds the pieces into dust. It flies away in the wind, and he feels as if some part of him goes with it. Maybe it's his loyalty to a place that hasn't been home for a long time, or his fear of disappointing people who seem adamant in always being disappointed in him, or his cowardice, or being unable to ask for what he wants, or—

It could be many things. It's probably all of those things together.

There's a strange freedom in destroying symbols, so Hypnos grabs the belt buckle shaped like a skull and destroys it too.

In its place, he puts a white poppy.

The skies haven't cleared. He knows they will stay like this for a while.

Or maybe forever.

Mortals always say that grief changes you. Maybe Hypnos has irreversibly changed now. Maybe he likes it, even. It would be disrespectful to Zagreus' memory if his death didn't affect the people that cared about him.

A fresh wave of tears burn behind his eyes, but Hypnos is too tired to cry again. There are some things he needs to do before he can allow himself his misery.

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He teleports back to the house in a puff of smoke reminiscent of clouds, directly in front of Lord Hades' desk.

Lord Hades' himself sits there, eyes trained on a mountain of papers.

"Hypnos, how kind of you to rejoin us."

Hypnos has never appreciated Lord Hades' sarcasm, or anyone's for that matter, and he's not about to start now.

"Lord Hades, if you could bring out my contract, we could conduct our business very quickly and then I'll be out of your hair."

Lor— no, not his Lord anymore, he guesses.

Hades stops, freezing in place for a split second before a pair of red and black eyes find his face and stare at him over the giant desk.

Hypnos feels a stab of pain at how much they look like Zagreus' eye, but the feeling dies quickly, because Zagreus' gaze was always warm and gentle, and if there's something Hades has never had in his eyes, it's warmth.

Ironic, considering what he's the lord of.

They stare at each other for a moment, Hypnos ready for a reprimand or a mocking remark, or even a fight.

What he gets instead is a weary sigh.

He blinks in surprise as Hades opens a drawer and takes out his contract.

"Somehow I knew this would be the outcome," Hades comments, voice at the same volume as always.

Hypnos is so shocked he can't reply.

Here he was, thinking he would have to fight tooth and nail to be let go, maybe destroy some property and be properly banned from the House, just to make absolutely sure that he

wouldn't be able to come back even if he wanted to.

He even though he might have to fight Hades himself if the argument escalated, and Hypnos absolutely would.

Thankfully, it doesn't come to that.

"Ah, I'm sorry, I'm just a little surprised that you have the contract at the ready like that."

If Hades notices the lack of title, he doesn't comment on it. "I'm simply trying to be as prepared as I can, given everything." Hades looks at him with defeat lining his shoulders. "I recognize that look in your eyes. You've had it for a while now. I know when someone wants to leave this place."

Oh.

Hypnos feels a little foolish. Hades is more perceptive than he gave him credit for. As expected from the Lord of the Underworld.

Hypnos nods, unsure if there's anything left to say.

He signs the resignation papers and immediately feels as if something has released him. The sensation is foreign and invasive, but goes away soon enough. He shakes himself a little, trying to get rid of it. It lingers on the tips of his fingers, tingling, and then disappears.

"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work here," Hypnos says, genuine enough. "But I fear it's time for me to focus on my actual duties."

Hades nods, silent.

That's okay. There's not much he can say that won't sound insincere or rehearsed or awkward.

There's no love lost between them, though Hypnos has always appreciated the leniency he got. He knows he's one of the only ones in the whole House who got it.

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“I shall say my goodbyes, and then I’ll go.” Hypnos gives a shallow bow, a last show of respect, and turns to the direction of Achilles’ post.

Before, though, he stops by Cerberus and scratches him under one of his chins. Cerberus’ tail thumps once, twice, before falling still again.

“Hey, buddy. Be good, okay?”

Cerberus whines, displeased, his intelligent eyes making it clear that he knows Hypnos is leaving for good.

Another person leaving and not coming back.

It hurts him to put more strain on Cerberus... but he can’t stay.

He leaves Cerberus and heads to Achilles.

Achilles is standing in the same place as always, back straight, gaze sharp. He looks at Hypnos and his eyes travel over him, maybe checking if he’s okay. Hypnos sees the moment Achilles notices the changes.

A blue gaze meets his own, and Hypnos is glad he doesn’t have to explain everything.

“Master Hypnos.”

“Just Hypnos.”

“It’s a matter of respect, sir.”

Hypnos conjures a small smile, taking a quick refuge in their usual banter. Achilles smiles back in his soft way, and Hypnos can see some of Zagreus in it, has always known that Zagreus learned much of his softness and kindness from the man standing in front of him.

It had taken him by surprise at first, to see a war hero be gentle like that.

Now he’s just glad that Zagreus had someone like Achilles to

influence the way he grew up.

The grief slams into him without warning, and a couple of tears fall before he can do anything about it. Achilles doesn't mention it though; they both know why, and Hypnos is sure Achilles is grieving—has been grieving for months—in his own way.

"I suppose this is goodbye, then?" Achilles asks.

"For now. I'm not forbidden from visiting... yet."

The allusion to the fight that almost happened makes Achilles chuckle. "That's good. If I may be so bold, please, make sure to keep it that way. It would be a shame if we could never talk again, Master Hypnos."

"I'll see what I can do." Hypnos says.

He wants to ask about Dusa's whereabouts, but before he even opens his mouth, something barrels into his side.

"Master Hypnos, are you really going away?" Dusa shouts, tangling herself on his right arm.

He's so surprised by her lack of decorum—not that Hypnos actually cares—that all he does for a few moments is stare at her, the snakes twisting around his arm as if trying to keep him there.

He finds it in himself to chuckle. "Yeah, I'm really going away. Sorry, Dusa."

"But why? Is it because of Master Thanatos? Meg told me what happened and I—"

"Thanatos was... part of it, yes. But I'm mostly just tired, Dusa."

He brings his arm up so that they're level with each other. Dusa's crying, big tears running down her face and falling to the floor. He wipes what he can with the edge of his blanket, but

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that just seems to make her cry harder.

“I’m— I’m gonna miss you a lot, Master Hypnos. I’m sorry that I nagged you about the line being disorganized and slow and I’m sorry about that time I dropped the rag on you or the time I accidentally dusted your face when I was trying to get the pillar behind you—”

“Dusa, breathe,” Hypnos says, trying to keep his voice gentle. He doesn’t want to give her the impression that her rambling is unwelcome. He knows how hurtful it can be.

She stops, takes a breath, and then keeps silent.

“I’ll be going away, but I can come and visit. So we’ll see each other from time to time, okay?”

Dusa sniffs and her snakes copy her, and that’s when Hypnos realizes they’re all crying.

It’s almost enough to make him reconsider, now that he’s had time to calm down. Almost.

Leaving makes people sad, and Hypnos would rather not make anyone sad, but he’d rather not be sad either, and right now staying in the House will only make it worse. The walls and the floor and the pool and the people are all a reminder of someone who used to roam this place and now is no more. He’s not sure he can bear having his eternal field of poppies turned all white.

The agony might just kill him.

It takes another couple of minutes for Dusa to calm down, with Achilles petting her head and trying to untangle her from Hypnos’ arm.

It makes Hypnos happy knowing there are people who will genuinely miss him.

For a long time he didn’t think that would ever happen.

As he's leaving Achilles and Dusa, he spies Megaera coming from the lounge to the front desk. They cross gazes, and Megaera stops, falters in his direction, as if she wants to walk up to him. But Hypnos tears his eyes away from her and teleports away before anyone else can accost him.

There's nothing left to do at the House.

He steps inside Mom's domain and prepares himself to wait for a while. To his surprise, though, his Mom appears right away, looking... a little bit flustered? Harried?

Is he seeing it right?

The look is so foreign that Hypnos can't be sure of the emotions showing on Mom's face. Of course, to anyone else she might look as impassive as ever, unruffleable, made of stone. But Hypnos knows his mother, maybe as well as she knows him.

It's the problem of being alive for so long while having such a close connection to one another.

"Hypnos."

"Mother."

"You are leaving." It's not a question, but he hears the inquisitive tone underneath.

"Yes."

"...because of Thanatos?"

"He's part of the reason, yes."

Mom purses her lips, not exactly displeasure, more like... frustration. "This isn't the way to resolve your disagreement with your brother."

"Oh, it's absolutely the way, mother. Thanatos will never admit when he's wrong, and I sure as hell am not apologizing either. I've done enough of that to him and you know it."

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“You two need to sit down and talk. Like adults.”

“Sure. One day. Maybe. Perhaps.”

Mom stares at him. He stares back.

He almost laughs, really. Mom has talked more with him these last months than the last decade combined, and he hasn’t forgiven her for that yet. He wonders if she knows.

She probably does.

“I had hoped... I hoped that things had been going better for you.”

“Instead of hoping from afar, you could have just asked.”

“I did not wish to interfere. You must learn to get by, by yourself.”

“Then I guess now’s the perfect time to start. Aren’t you proud of me?”

She doesn’t look happy at his quip, but he didn’t say it to make her happy, anyway.

“Hypnos, leaving is foolish—”

“Mother. I came to say goodbye. So, goodbye.”

Mom doesn’t answer. She looks like she doesn’t know how to answer. She looks like she’s seeing him for the first time.

Good.

“I would say I’ll visit, but we both know what your answer is going to be.” And before she can say anything to that, he teleports away.

He can see why Thanatos likes doing it so much.



Back in his domain, Hypnos goes to sleep, and for the first time in centuries he can take care of his duties without the

anxiety of having something or someone waiting for him to wake up back at the House.

He spends some time in a child's dream of fluffy pink clouds and talking candy, because children's dreams are usually soft and happy and just wacky enough to be the kind of distraction he needs right now.

He wakes up hours later, feeling somewhat refreshed and accomplished.

Then his eyes fall on the white poppies and it's like the happiness is ripped out of him by a careless hand.

The black hole in his chest is even bigger now, a void where half his heart used to be, and Hypnos is starting to understand that this hole will never be filled. He will always walk around with this space inside himself now, this empty place that used to house red poppies and beautiful smiles, but now looks like a barren land.

The universe took something from him, and Hypnos is incapable of getting it back.

He allows himself to kneel down and cry. The poppies lean and curve in his direction, trying to comfort him. One of them, white as snow, brushes against his thigh. Hypnos picks it up and brings it to his chest, gently hugging it. It's a poor substitute for the pair of strong arms he wishes were holding him instead, but Hypnos closes his eyes and pretends.

No one's around to reprimand him for it, anyway.

He must fall asleep while sitting up, because when he opens his eyes again, he knows time has passed. There's a second of confusion as Hypnos tries to place what woke him. And then, low and gentle, it catches his ear. It's someone softly calling his name.

hypnos

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A shiver runs down his spine. No one should be able to reach him here without him knowing.

hypnos, come

“Who are you, and how did you get in?”

there is no time to lose

Getting up, Hypnos scans the horizon, looking for clues. The sky is still dark and angry, the poppies are still red and white, the wind still runs in the fields. Nothing seems out of place. “I’m not going anywhere until you identify yourself.”

zagreus needs your help

The shiver turns into a chill that races up and down his body, his heartbeat quickening.

“It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the one who took Zagreus.”

merely fulfilling a wish

“Whose?”

his

The voice sounds sincere enough, if a little on the blank side. But Hypnos would be foolish if he believed it.

“Nice try, but Zagreus is dead.”

no. he lives

“No, I saw his fate on a divine tool. He’s dead and you can’t fool me.”

he lives. and misses you

Fuck.

“Fuck you.”

you draw him

“What— How do you know that?” The surprise shakes him to his core. Hypnos only draws Zagreus when he’s alone in his domain, where no one will ever see. “Have you been spying on me?”

I look, sometimes

“What do you want?”

help

“With what? Aren’t you all powerful?”

help zagreus

“Zagreus is—” Hypnos takes a deep breath and resists shouting to the empty air. Time to change tactics.

“Okay, fine. *Fine*. I’ll bite. Where’s Zagreus?”

hurt

Oh, gods.

“Where?”

come. I will show you the way

This is so stupid.

He needs to call for someone, preferably Mom, and ask for help. If this... entity is really the one who killed Zagreus, then they’re incredibly powerful. He can’t hope to win a fight against them.

He should call for help.

come. please

There’s something in the voice, an undercurrent of energy that feels incredibly familiar and alien. It makes him think of the color purple.

He’s so fucking stupid.

follow the flowers

So, so stupid.

Hypnos runs his hands through his hair, takes a deep breath, and says, “Okay.”

Near his feet, a path of poppies start slowly turning dark. They go from red to dark red to black, and the path slowly forms in front of him.

It leads away, out of his domain and into the chthonic web.

Hypnos follows.

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Zagreus steps out of the river and on the bank, and immediately feels the cold seep through his feet and into his bones. It's uncomfortable and painful and wet; the sensation almost enough to make him miss his blazing feet, or the warmth of the House.

Almost.

Thinking of the House makes him remember the people he left there, so he shoves those thoughts away before they can intrude on this moment.

Because this is his moment; no one else's.

The mouthful of cold air he takes, burning down his throat and lungs, makes the moment all the more real. Every second of it clarifies the single idea looming over the horizon of his mind, and everything he can see enforces it. He looks around, doing his best to imprint every detail permanently in his memory, as he stares up at the sky,



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cloudless and blue; at the trees, muted green and frosty white; at the ground, green and soft; at the tiny colorful flowers, valiant little things braving the snow.

Then his legs threaten to give in, so he crouches down, bending forward and balancing himself on his feet.

"I'm free," he whispers to the grass. "I'm free. I'm finally *free*."

He brings his hands to his face and laughs, unable to contain his joy. He laughs loudly, uncaring if anyone hears him or thinks him mad, happy to not have to listen to people say a prince shouldn't be so boisterous, shouldn't be so loud, shouldn't be so free.

He's not a prince anymore.

He's not *anything* anymore.

He's just Zagreus.

And he's free.

"Fuck," he mutters, feeling the hot tears slide down his cheeks and past his chin, falling on the snow before disappearing. Habit tells him to hide them, to swallow the sobs back into his chest, to hastily wipe the tears away before anyone sees them.

But there's no one around.

And even if there were, he wouldn't have to listen to them.

Because Zagreus is *free*.

He laughs again, even as more tears fall. The combination of euphoria and sadness is odd, pulling at his heart in different directions at the same time, telling his body to react in different ways.

It's a cocktail of emotions he can't remember ever feeling, but he's so glad that he has the chance now. It's different, it's *new*, and he loves it.

He allows himself to just be for a while, as he lets all the emotions wash over him, both the good and the bad.

He watches the scenery, enjoying the few wildlife quietly creeping out of the woods, passing near him. Some of them notice him and take off for the depths of the wilderness immediately after, but several others get surprisingly close before moving on. He doesn't know any of them by name, but the little brown one with the bushy tail is especially cute.

It comes very close to him, watching him as curiously as he's watching it. It grabs something off the ground and skitters away, disappearing on the canopies above his head.

He's so grateful that he has the chance to witness these things now, without the threat of death looming over him, tainting his every experience. Until the threat was gone, he'd never realized just how anxious it made him that the Styx could drag him back to the House any moment.

Zagreus shivers, from the cold sinking deeper into his bones, from the habitual fear of being outside and waiting for inevitable death, and decides that's enough moping.

He wants to run, wants to climb mountains and swim in oceans and lakes. He wants to put this new body to good use and see what he can accomplish without invisible shackles binding him.

So he runs.

His abrupt movement startles an elegant animal with a crown of horns on its head, and Zagreus throws an apology over his shoulders as he passes by.

Then he laughs at his silliness, relishing that he can do such silly things and laugh at them without any reprimand.

How unfamiliar.

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How *exhilarating*.

He runs and climbs over rocks taller than ten of his father, jumps over a large section of the river he was swimming in, and skids to a halt at the edge of a small cliff overlooking the world.

The whole of Greece seems to stretch out before him.

Of course, there are taller mountains and steeper cliffs—he can see them from here, calling to him with their peaks of ice and dark woods. Beckoning. Enticing.

Even so, this small precipice on the side of a hill is more than enough to allow him to admire the country he was born in, but never got to really see until now.

The fact that he can do this, can go out and search and explore as he pleases, still hasn't sunk in.

But now he's got all the time in the world to process it.

(He knows that at some point he will have to deal with the consequences of leaving, no matter how big or small they may be. But for this? For this freedom? He will meet any consequence head on.)



His first experience with living mortals is a week later.

He'd spent most of his first day roaming around mountainsides and the edges of abandoned farms, then the following days, he had mostly slept like the dead, ironically.

It had been frustrating to realize how much energy he spent with just a little exploring, but he knows that most of it is probably just the fact that he's inexperienced with this body and these powers. Whatever he is now is way more powerful than he was before, and if there's something Zagreus has never

been good at, it's the finer control of godly powers.

That's... that's going to be a pain to learn.

After waking up from his several-day-long nap, he decides to take a dive in the closest river, just to experience water that isn't red, semi-sentient, and trying to drag him back anywhere.

The cold is a pain to deal with—literally—but he's learning. It takes some concerted effort, and a good amount of his energy goes toward keeping himself warm, but he will get the hang of it.

Soon.

Very soon.

...Hopefully.

He throws himself in the water as soon as he sees it, and the scream of surprise that follows catches him entirely by surprise.

Immediately, he pops his head back out and sees a pale-faced young woman staring at him in shock as she staggers away from the river, two wide-eyed children clinging to the skirt of her himation as they peek out at him with wide eyes.

There's a few seconds of awkward silence where they just maintain eye contact, without either of them moving. Then the woman speaks, her voice respectful, but trembling slightly.

"Forgive us, Master Spirit, we didn't know this river was yours."

Oh, this is awkward. She thinks he's a river spirit, which, well... it's better than the alternative.

After all, what is he going to say? Ah, no, I'm actually the Prince of the Underworld, but thanks to my great-great-grandparent who's partially my grandparent and now also partially my parent, I am free from the constraints of being the Son of Hades, so now I can roam free through Greece and

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throw myself into random rivers?

Yeah, no.

He opens his mouth to spout some bullshit about not being a territorial river spirit, and they're free to use it as they please, since he's just passing by. But something else comes out instead.

"I'm not a spirit."

What?

"I'm a god. You may call me Zagreus."

What???

Her eyes widen in surprise. "Oh, forgive me, Lord Zagreus! I did not realize—"

While the panicked woman continues trying to obtain an unneeded forgiveness for wrongs she didn't commit, Zagreus reruns the last few seconds in his head, startled and a little bit afraid.

It's almost like his mouth moved by itself. Nothing that came out of it was what he wanted to say.

He'd intended to make up a name and an aspect on the spot, and let the mortals go on their merry way, unaware of whom they had actually met. Instead, it was like something pushed his lies away, and the only thing left to fill the space in his mouth was the truth.

Hmmm. He has an idea of what might've happened, but figuring that out can wait.

As he refocuses on the woman, he realizes with a start that she is kneeling on the ground and urging her children to kneel, too, her face pale and drawn with what he realizes now is fear.

"Oh gods, please don't kneel, that's completely unnecessary," he says frantically, swimming to the shore and climbing out

onto the bank.

She pauses, looking at him uncertainly, one of her children already kneeling on the cold snow, and the other looking at him with... fear? Yes, that's fear on their face, as well.

How wonderful, his first meeting with mortals and he's already making them fear him, accidentally or not. Even the children.

He— he *thinks* he can deal with children. Maybe? Probably? They can't be any worse than dealing with child-shades, right?

To test this, he approaches slowly, trying to keep a soft smile on his face so he looks less threatening, imitating the way Achilles used to approach him when he was little and prone to panic attacks.

It seems to work. When he smiles, they all relax somewhat, though the young woman—their mother?—still looks nervous. Pushing past how uncomfortable it makes him that she looks at him with such fear, he offers a hand to help her up.

"Please, there's no need for that. Especially not in the snow."

She takes his hand hesitantly, and he gently helps her to her feet. Once she's upright again, the children huddle behind her, peeking out at him with large, dark-colored eyes, big and round and curious.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. I didn't mean to mistake you for someone else," she says, wringing her hands.

She looks like a commoner, with her simple clothes in green and brown, and lack of adornments. What they lack in finery, though, they make up for in practicality. The clothes of her and the children are thick and heavy, ideal for this type of weather, as opposed to his thin chiton.

"Don't worry about it. How could you know who I am if I've

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never actually revealed who I am?”

“Ah, w—well...”

“And this river isn’t mine, by the way. Feel free to use it as much as you want.”

“Thank you, my Lord. We were just going to gather some water. This river’s spring is nearby.” She hesitates for a moment, looking down at her children, then looking up at him again. “Would you accompany us? We can offer food in exchange for some protection. I understand this isn’t exactly standard, but—”

“Oh, of course. I don’t mind. Lead the way, please.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” she says, then turns around and starts walking, the children trailing along behind her.

Zagreus follows too, feeling utterly out of his depth. No one has ever called him Lord before. It makes him think of his father, which is an unpleasant thought, but mostly it just makes him feel weird. Honestly, he has no real idea of how mortals and immortals deal with each other.

He’s used to dealing with gods as one deals with family—for obvious reasons—with some healthy dose of fake respect, and sassy remarks that can be masqueraded as jokes.

When it comes to mortals, though, he’s not sure what he should or shouldn’t accept, what’s normal for interactions with them, and if he should be offering random rivers at all. What if the actual spirit from that river took offense?

And then, in a burst of clarity that almost has him giggling to himself, Zagreus remembers that he’s free.

He’s free, and no one can tell him what to do.

He can be whatever type of god he wants.

He smiles to himself at that realization, freedom slowly sliding through the corners of his mind, settling firmly into

place and refusing to be dislodged. Soon enough, he won't default to expecting the unreasonable standards set by people who never cared.

Soon enough, he's going to get used to his new status.

One of the children looks back at him, curiosity written all over their freckled face. When he notices them staring, he gives them a wink. They smile and turn back to the front again, suddenly shy.

Zagreus hasn't had many interactions with children in his life, but these ones are pretty cute.

They soon reach the spring, and Zagreus can't contain his own curiosity anymore.

"If I may... how did you know I wasn't mortal?"

She looks up from where she's filling a waterskin with clear, cold water. "Ah, no mortal would jump into a river in this freezing weather, of course. We do not have your hardiness."

"Oh, you're right," he says, laughing a little. He feels a bit embarrassed, but she's talking as if they're discussing the weather, and her nonchalance makes him less self-conscious about his lack of thought. Zagreus would think her completely unfazed by him if it weren't for how she first reacted when they met.

"There's also the matter of your eye. As soon as you looked up, I knew you couldn't be a mere mortal."

With a start, he brings a hand to his face, touching just below his right eye. "Ah, yes."

He keeps forgetting his eye has changed.

Suddenly, he realizes his rudeness, and asks, "What is your name, my lady?"

She looks up as if startled, eyes wide in his direction. "Oh, I

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am no lady, my Lord! There's no need for that."

He blinks, baffled. "What should I call you, then? Woman? Wench? That's just disrespectful."

They blink at each other, and he sees her lips twitch, though she doesn't laugh. Maybe she thinks it's disrespectful to laugh in a god's presence.

"I see you care little for customs," she says, handing a waterskin to her children and starting to fill another one.

He leans against a tree. "Customs are a bore. After you've lived with them for centuries, they become meaningless nonsense."

"I see. You would know more about it than me, of course." She refills the second waterskin and gets up, gesturing to her children. "This is my son Dorotheus, and my daughter Ophelia. I am Acacia, at your service."

He points at himself, laughter in his voice. "I'm Zagreus, jumper of rivers. Nice to meet you."

The children giggle at him, and that seems to get him a smile from Acacia.

A pang in his chest gets him by surprise.

He misses Nyx.

He misses being small, able to hide behind her legs, little hands grabbing her peplos like it was the only thing keeping him from being lost. He misses being carried when he was too tired to walk, still in that period where he couldn't maintain his stamina for long, even as a god. He misses sneaking into the garden and waiting for her to find him, knowing they would spend some time there together.

But mostly, he just misses her.

I should let her know I'm okay, he thinks, internally wincing

at the chewing out waiting for him.

Acacia gestures to the way they came. "Let's return and I shall give you my offerings."

Zagreus nods, walking beside her this time. "I mean, I appreciate it, but you really don't have to."

"Lord Zagreus, you can't go around refusing offerings. What will your followers think?"

"I don't have any followers."

"I thought as much, but if you want some, it's time to start learning."

Zagreus chuckles. "Am I that obvious?"

"A little bit. But mostly it's the fact that I've never heard of you, even while living in Athens."

"Oh, you're from Athens? How is it there?"

Her expression falls, something like grief overtaking her face. "Probably better than most other city-states. But at this point everything is falling apart."

"What? Why?"

Her gaze goes distant, looking into something far away. "The eternal winter. The war. The famine." She turns to him, smile so sad that Zagreus can almost feel it. "Take your pick."

Zagreus frowns. "I didn't know it was that bad. I'm sorry for bringing up bad memories."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Those memories wouldn't leave me even if I wanted them to."

A little voice chimes in from the back. "Papa died. It's why we're moving."

Zagreus looks back, to where Ophelia and Dorotheus are walking behind them, bundled up in their himations like tiny walking cocoons.

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Ophelia is staring at Zagreus like she's expecting something from him, some form of reaction or maybe some words of condolence. There's a defiance to her stance, her little shoulders held high, eyes boring into his own. Dorotheus is looking at the ground, holding his sister's hand.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ophelia," he answers, not quite able to understand her exact feelings, but still sad for her.

Her eyes widen in surprise, mouth dropping open in disbelief.

That... certainly wasn't what he was expecting. He turns back to Acacia wearing what he knows is a baffled expression.

To answer his unasked question, she smiles at him, though there's nothing happy about it.

"Widows don't have much leeway in Athens. People were... less than pleased when I told them we were moving."

Ah, so Ophelia was testing him. Smart girl.

"Some of them tried to stop us," Acacia continues, "but we grabbed what we could and ran."

"Where are you going?"

"My sister lives in Crete. It's not an amazing place by any means, but I've heard they're faring better there. I will try to procure passage for us, by boat."

"Faring better, meaning more resources?" At her nod, Zagreus continues, "How long has this winter been going on for?"

"Since before I was born. Some historical accounts mention centuries, but no one's quite sure."

Zagreus doesn't really know how the surface works yet, but he's pretty sure winters shouldn't be this long. He will have to look into it later.

They arrive at a small cart with two wheels, a tired looking animal Zagreus has never seen at the front, nibbling on the grass. He only now realizes they walked past the point where they met. Acacia doesn't seem to mind that he followed them, at least, and she did mention she had offerings—though Zagreus is loath to take food from people who clearly need it more than him. Her body is far too thin to be healthy, and her children are not much better, though they certainly have more on their bones.

She lays some cloth down on the ground, beckoning him to sit. Once he does, the children follow suit, sitting on either side of him in a circle. Acacia opens a little cloth bundle, and Zagreus leans in her direction to look inside.

She smiles at him gently, like he's a curious child, and some of the tension leaves his shoulders when she doesn't immediately scold him for wanting a peek.

"These are grass peas," she says, pointing to the bundle, where a bunch of light-colored grains sit, looking like teeth.

"They look like teeth," he says, and then immediately regrets it. That's so rude!

But the children laugh, and Dorotheus finally speaks.

"See, mama, I told you they look like teeth! Even gods think so!"

She gives them both an unimpressed look. "Teeth or not, it's food, and you better eat it."

"So you eat it like that?" Zagreus asks.

"Oh, no. They are very toxic to human consumption when raw." She pauses, giving him an appraising look. "Though you would probably handle it better. But no, we usually make soup or flour from it. I only brought it out to show you."

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"It's animal food!" Ophelia says, pointing to the animal munching on grass a few ways away.

"Ah, so there's no distinction between animal and human food?"

"Well, animals usually get the... not exactly worse food, but the less nutritional ones. In times of famine we can't waste good food on animals, unless they're important, like a pack animal, or one you might kill for meat."

"But you're eating grass peas? Animal food?"

"Yes. It's the only grain we have right now."

Zagreus stays silent, digesting the information. He doesn't know what he could say, anyway. I'm sorry the surface has been shitty? I'm sorry you're hungry? Don't worry, you won't feel hungry in the afterlife?

Yeah, no. He has *some* manners, okay? Nyx and Achilles tried really hard, and he picked up at least a bit of it.

Acacia seems oblivious to his internal struggle, or at least she doesn't show anything on her face as she grabs another package from a big pack. Inside, Zagreus finally sees something he recognizes.

"Hey, sausages!"

"Ah, you know sausages? Good, then I won't have to explain how they're made."

"...How are they made?"

"...You don't want to know."

"I really do."

"You really don't."

They stare at each other, and Zagreus decides to trust her. She looks like she knows what she's talking about.

She hands each of them a sausage. Zagreus examines it for a

while, and when he bites into it, it's dry, but tasty, probably seasoned with things he's never heard the names of. Then Acacia brings out some bread, while Ophelia passes around the waterskins, and for a while there's only silence as they eat.

Surface food has a different feel to it. It tastes... real. Solid. Not that the Underworld has ghost food, of course not, but there's something to be said about eating something made by mortal hands.

(He suddenly misses Eurydice's cooking, and her singing, and just her personality in general, the way she would click her tongue every time she realized he didn't know an ingredient, as if that was a grandiose failing in his education.)

Part of him thinks he shouldn't be accepting their food at all, when this little family could use it much more than him, but Acacia would probably take it as an offense.

When they're done, he peeks inside the bag as Acacia puts everything away. There's not much food left.

She notices his nosiness, but doesn't say anything.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes," she answers, gesturing for the children to come closer. She helps both of them climb inside the cart, where he can see a couple of blankets bundled up in a corner. "It'll be night soon, and I need to find a safe place to camp. We will follow the trail for as long as we can. Hopefully the mountainous terrain will have mercy on us."

Zagreus still has much to learn about the surface, but he already understands that nature is not a merciful thing. Something a little bit like desperation surges inside his chest, and his brain insists on going over a list of every way they could die before arriving at their destination.

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He hides his anxiety as best as he can. "Alright. Keep to the trail and I'll see you soon, okay?"

Acacia looks at him with something like suspicion. "For what?"

"Just wait. It's a surprise."

She huffs, lips pulling into a slight smile. "Most mortals would be very afraid if a god told them they have a surprise for them."

"But you're not most mortals. You're strong."

She looks surprised and pleased at his words, her face not exactly knowing what to do with those feelings.

"Most mortals would call that strength 'foolishness'."

"Somehow, I don't think you agree with them."

She chuckles. "You are very smart for a god who has only recently left the nest."

"You flatter me, my lady."

"Flattery is for the spineless and the sleazy. I'm only telling the truth."

"I... accept the compliment, then?"

"Good answer."

"Zagreus is smart!" Ophelia shouts from the cart, voice loud in that way that all children seem to be.

Some part of Zagreus still unused to being on the surface, to being free, expects someone to spring from the bushes to reprimand her, to tell her to lower her voice.

But reprimands don't come. Acacia smiles at her daughter with all the love he personally thinks a mother should have for her children, and he's overtaken by a cocktail of envy and sadness so potent it almost brings him to tears.

She must see something on his face, because she lays a hand

on his arm, something he's pretty sure mortals don't go around doing to gods. Her hand has a weight and a warmth he's not used to, but it's nice. Comforting.

"We will go now, but I'll keep an eye out for you, yes?"

Her voice is softer than it's been so far, and Zagreus is incredibly grateful to her for that, even as he's also incredibly embarrassed for being so transparent to a stranger.

But there's also some safety in it. She doesn't know him, doesn't know the good or the bad things that have shaped him—even if she can see something on his face—so if she goes around telling people a god can be vulnerable like this, no one's going to believe her.

Zagreus doesn't really think she would do it, though. She seems to have honor, her own little code of what is and isn't acceptable.

She's a good person; he can feel it, though he's not sure how.

Zagreus smiles and waves as they leave, the children shouting and waving at him with an energy that belies their frail bodies.

Once they're out of sight, he turns around and runs back to the river, trying to estimate how many fish their cart can carry without toppling over or killing their only animal out of sheer exhaustion.

It's the least he can do for their kindness and their food, for the little distraction they provided him with, even though he's certain Acacia will protest.



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He delivers the fish half an hour later and has his first taste of true mortal gratitude. Acacia tries to kneel for him again, clearly trying to keep her tears from falling, and Zagreus has to pull her up by her hands, thoroughly embarrassed. He can't dodge the way Ophelia throws her arms out of the cart and hugs him, though he doesn't try very hard, if he's being honest. She's half in the cart and half hanging on to him, and Zagreus has a moment of sad realization.

He can't remember when he'd last hugged someone.

He squeezes her a bit, making her giggle, trying to ignore how thin she is in favor of enjoying the moment.

Dorotheus is shy, not moving from his corner while he eyes the fish with a hungry look, but he gives Zagreus a big smile anyway.

Acacia thanks him again, making him feel a pleasant mix of awkward and happy about it. He's never been able to help someone so directly before, let alone been acknowledged so genuinely for his efforts.

"I will pray to you, and make offerings in your name," she says, adjusting her himation to cover her face better as the wind picks up.

"That's really unnecessary. I didn't do this to make a follower out of you."

"Oh, I know. I'll do it anyway."

"But— I—" he sighs in frustration. He doesn't know how to explain to her how useless it would be to pray to him. He's not the god of anything. "I don't even know my aspect. I'm probably god of nothing. There's nothing I can offer you in return."

"Every god is a god of something, Lord Zagreus. I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually." She smiles with a kindness he's

not used to being directed at him. “And when you do, let me know.”

Then she picks up the reins and walks away, leading their pack animal along the trail once more, Ophelia and Dorotheus waving as they fade into the distance. They look a little sad this time, as if they know they won’t see him again.

For a moment, he has the stupid idea of following them to make sure they reach their destination, but he knows he shouldn’t.

He can’t go around interfering with the Fates too much. They might take notice. They might decide Zagreus is doing more than he should, being nosier than he has any right to be.

They might decide to undo the good things he does, and Zagreus doesn’t want to see the people he helped fall into disgrace because of him.

Forcing himself to turn around again, this time for good, is harder than it should be.



(He doesn’t notice the little patch of yellow dandelions he leaves behind.)



He doesn’t encounter any other mortals—at least not ones that seem like they would want to talk to him, anyway—for a long time afterwards, and his days and weeks start morphing together.

He sleeps a lot.

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A lot.

It's worrying; is it a side effect of having a new body? Is this new existence so unnatural that it requires excessive amounts of energy just to maintain it? Or is it just a period of adjustment? What if he stays like this forever, being awake for a few hours and then falling asleep for days on end?

What if his body gives out, eventually? This doesn't seem sustainable, after all. Would he even be able to exist without his physical body? Would he be stuck down in Chaos' domain too, unable to deal with the physical planes lest the world decides to erase him from it?

And what is *up* with these dandelions? The things just keep sprouting wherever he goes, looking bright and cheerful in all their yellowness, uncaring that Zagreus' mood gets worse and worse every time he lays eyes on them.

After a nap that lasts a whole week, Zagreus is frustrated enough to ask for help.

He sits at the edge of a cliff, looking over a tiny village in the far distance, and concentrates on the connection he feels in his bones, in an attempt to reach out to the one being he knows will probably help him.

It takes a good while to get a hold of it. He's still very much an amateur when it comes to dealing with energies, and there's no one around to explain them to him. The situation dredges up the feeling of worthlessness that he's able to ignore on the good days; it stretches from his stomach up to his throat, suffocating but intangible, a reminder of what he's always thought of himself.

In the middle of his self-deprecating thoughts, he feels the connection expand. It's as if he's wiped a heavy fog from a

mirror, and he can finally see through it. The picture is not the best, as if he's communicating with something far away, but it holds. Good enough.

Master Chaos? he calls, wincing at how loud his mind voice is. It echoes through whatever non-space he's occupying right now, bouncing off invisible walls.

zagreus

Ah, hello. It's good to hear your voice. It's hard to manage the volume, and this time his voice is too low.

likewise, Chaos answers, seemingly having no problem in hearing them.

Master Chaos, I have some questions.

good, I have been awaiting your questions. what is it you wish to ask?

I'm always tired, and I'm sleeping a lot. I'm a little bit worried about it. Is this normal?

ah yes, I've seen you sleeping for long periods of time. I have been wondering about this, myself

You've been watching me?

This may have been concerning to other people, but Zagreus doesn't mind. It's good to know someone's keeping an eye on him, someone he can trust to be doing it out of concern, and not some misguided attempt to keep him in check, or to keep him from making a mess of things.

It makes him feel safe.

only sometimes. just to assure myself you are well

Thank you, I appreciate it.

you are welcome. I am trying to be attentive, it is good to hear I'm doing it right

Zagreus can't help his smile, and he wonders if Chaos can

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feel his fondness.

I'm glad we can talk like this. I was afraid that it might not work, even when you assured me it would.

it is as I said; you are part chaos now, more than you ever were before. I remade you directly, with purpose. there is a connection between us that would be extremely hard to sever

I was wondering about that, and I can't believe I forgot to ask... why did you keep the human part?

should I have erased it too? I was under the impression it was important to you

Well, it's not that I hate it or anything, but it doesn't seem to serve any purpose. The only thing it ever did was make me a little less immortal than everyone else, I guess.

I was... afraid

Afraid?

yes. afraid that taking too much from you would erase the person you are. that wasn't what you wanted, was it?

No... no, it wasn't. I'm glad you thought about that, because that didn't even go through my mind at the time, holy shit.

I thought as much. the only piece that needed to go was the one from your lord father. there wasn't a need to take more than that. I tried to keep you as you as possible

Again, I appreciate it so much, Master Chaos. Thank you so much for doing this for me. Oh no, he's getting emotional again, and he's sure Chaos can feel it through their bond.

and again, you are welcome. the world would have been less without you in it

It's more than anyone has ever said to him. Zagreus chokes on a sob, tries to push it down before he blubbers all over their connection.

Razia

He finds himself staying silent for a moment, until the urge to cry subsides.

I am told it is okay to cry. you should try it

Zagreus is surprised by the laugh that comes out of him. *I know, I know. I just have other questions to get to. I can cry later.*

you are always full of questions. I enjoy it. please, ask

Right! So... do you have any idea why I'm always tired? Is it a side effect of the change? Will it go away?

I do not know, but it stands to reason that you are simply not used to the new you

Zagreus breathes a sigh of relief. Chaos doesn't sound worried, so he will try not to worry, too. *Okay. Next question. Were you... were you with me when I encountered Acacia and her children?*

yes

Ah. I guess you were the one who didn't let me lie, then?

correct

I see. Why?

you are new to the world, now. you must introduce yourself properly. it would not do to have the mortals thinking about you under another name. that would bring you trouble in the future

But I... I don't want followers. I'm not a god of anything; I never was. There's nothing I can give people.

you think too little of yourself, zagreus

Just trying to be realistic here.

I believe the word you are looking for is 'pessimistic'

I guess we can agree to disagree?

a good solution, yes

Alright. Next question, then. Do you have any idea what my new abilities might be? What sort of test I could try? Some training

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exercises to suggest?

I am sorry, but in this subject I am at a loss. your new abilities are yours to find out

Yeeaaaaaah, I thought so. Thanks, anyway.

you are welcome. now, the connection is slipping away. I believe you are getting tired again

And sure enough, he can feel his muscles loose already, back hunched over in his sitting position. He groans, unsatisfied, but at least a little bit less ignorant than before.

Ugh, this sucks. I'm gonna take a nap that's gonna last however many days, and then I'll figure this out. I'll keep you updated on my progress, Master Chaos.

please, do

Zagreus tries to say goodbye, but the connection fizzles out of nowhere. He breaks into a big yawn, annoyed, but unable to keep his eyes from shutting. It's an odd feeling, exhaustion pulling him down like this. He can feel himself leaning backward, until he's resting his back against the cold snow, but he can't muster the energy to care much, with sleep calling his name so strongly.

He should move. Sleeping on a cliff could be dangerous, even if he's pretty resistant to damage in general. Not to mention he doesn't want anyone from the village finding him here. Who knows how they'd react?

It's probably also a bad idea to sleep directly in the snow, even if his powers seem to be keeping the cold at bay.

He *should* move. He should... but his limbs don't listen to him when he tells them to move, and suddenly the snowy ground feels incredibly comfortable. Cozy, even. Zagreus falls asleep right there, on the edge of a small cliff on a small hill

Razia

overlooking a small village.

In the middle of the snow.



(He dreams.

Black nights and white snow. Fluffy clouds of all the colors of the rainbow. Mortal children chasing each other in a field of dandelions, so yellow and bright as to rival the sun.

Someone calling his name. Someone looking for him. Someone waiting for him.

White curls and golden eyes, slender fingers with ink marks.

Wings. So many wings.

He dreams, protected by his own mind. So protected that Sleep doesn't find him.)



Sometimes, Zagreus wakes up crying, and he doesn't know why. (He does. He does he does he does.)



He wakes up nine days later—how he knows the exact time he's been sleeping is a mystery to him—under a healthy layer of snow, and with his extremities burning and sharp as if he's been stuck full of needles.

At first it's hard to parse what's happening, sleep still clinging to him with tiredness deadening his limbs. Zagreus tries to sit up, supporting himself on his arms, but his hands

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spasm instead, sending a shock of pain right up his arms and into his spine.

“Shit!” he shouts, falling back onto the ground, snow entering his mouth as soon as he opens it.

“Ow ow ow, what the fuck, what the fuck?” he can’t help but say, spitting snow back out. The ice crystals feel so cold that they threaten to burn his tongue, and that, combined with the heavy sensation of snow piled on top of him, is what gets him to move.

He climbs out of the snow cocoon slowly, painfully, unable to feel some of his toes, though at least his fingers seem to be working. The process is difficult; he’s been buried pretty deeply, which is mildly horrifying, but at least he was somehow still able to breathe.

When he’s out, the light of the moon greets him, shining bright against the rocks and the wet grass. The forest at the edge of the hill is quiet at this time of night, sleepy, the only sound the gentle sway of leaves in the wind. The village in the distance seems mostly asleep too, with only one house sporting any kind of light, though Zagreus had wondered before falling asleep how many of those houses are even occupied in the first place.

He’s noticed how sparse the population is, how people seem to be moving away from Greece in droves.

The night is quiet, and it would be a pleasant moment, were it not for the pain he’s currently in.

He brings a hand over his face and stares. His fingers are all various shades of dark red and white, and he can see a little bit of purple. And they hurt.

Gods, they hurt so much.

He has no idea what this is, has never heard anyone mention it before, but he's sure it has something to do with the cold. If he could travel back to the past, he would slap himself upside the head for falling asleep right there.

Torn between trying to deal with this on his own and asking for help, the decision is taken out of his hands by a sound in the bushes behind him.

He gets up and swivels around, instantly alert despite the pain, and his gaze falls onto someone.

It's a commoner, judging by the clothes, very similar to what Acacia was wearing. The man is very bundled up, looking warm inside his himation, and Zagreus feels incredibly envious of him for a split second. He's holding an oil lamp, but even without the light Zagreus would have been able to see his weathered face, and the dog by his side.

"Ah, forgive me, my Lord, I didn't mean to scare you. Are you alright?" the man asks, accent thicker than Acacia's.

"I'm alright, don't worry," he answers, though he knows he sounds tired and frustrated. He hasn't had much contact with mortals because most of them seem either scared or suspicious of him. This one doesn't seem like either one.

"Right," the man walks a little closer, bringing the oil lamp up as if he's trying to see Zagreus' face. "it's just— by the gods, my Lord, that looks awful!"

Zagreus wants to feel offended by whatever the man saw in him that elicited that response, but then he realizes the man is looking at where he has his hands clenched under his chin.

"Ah," he begins, extremely embarrassed, bringing his hands down in an aborted attempt to hide them out of sight, "you see, I... I fell asleep. In the snow. Stupid, I know."

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The man opens his mouth to answer, then pauses to take a good look at Zagreus under the meager light. Zagreus doesn't know how well morals can see in the dark, but the man's gaze is attentive and sharp for his apparent old age.

He takes Zagreus in for a long moment, contemplatively.

Then he says, "My Lord, would you like to come to my house? It's a very humble place, but I have a nice warm fire and some warm drinks, so I might be able to help you with the frostbite."

"Frostbite?"

"The injuries in your hand. There's a little bit on your nose too." He moves the lamp closer to the ground. "And on your toes. Ah, that one looks like it's gone already."

Zagreus looks down to find one of his toes is indeed missing. Huh.

The picture is... strangely interesting to look at, though the part of him that must be his shriveled up survival instincts is very, very unhappy right now. Zagreus decides the smart thing to do is set aside his miniscule pride and accept the offer. What's he got to prove, anyway? Not much.

They move slowly, his movements incredibly hindered by the missing toes—messing up his balance far more than he would've expected—and the ones that are so damaged he can't feel them, let alone move them.

"What's your name, good sir?" Zagreus asks as the man helps him down the hill. The village suddenly seems too far away for them to ever make it, but moving towards it anyway helps keep his mind off of it. It's helping him regain feeling, too, which is a good thing. Still hurts, though.

"It's Theodore, my Lord. And this is Korax." Theodore

gestures to the dog following at their heels, black as the night, its sharp brown eyes watching Zagreus closely.

“My name’s Zagreus. It’s a pleasure to meet you, though I wish it could have been in less embarrassing circumstances.”

“Don’t worry, Lord Zagreus. Frostbite catches everyone off-guard at least once in their lives.”

The way to Theodore’s house is not as long as Zagreus feared; the small house is perched at the edges of the forest, a ways away from the village proper. It looks old, but sturdy, a warm light emanating from a window. If he concentrates, he can hear the crackling of a fire somewhere inside.

Once they’re inside, Theodore helps Zagreus sit in a bundle of furs by the fire. “I’ll grab some medicine and something hot to drink, to warm you up. Korax, be a good girl and keep him company, will you?”

When Theodore walks away, Korax pads forward to get a good look at him. She’s a beautiful thing, as tall as Zagreus when he’s sitting down, black fur thick and glossy. She sniffs around him, eyes intelligent in a way Zagreus has learned some animals can be, as she determines his threat level.

She reminds him of Cerberus.

“Hey, girl,” he whispers, not wanting to spook her.

She eyes him up and down, sniffs again, then brings her head closer, presumably not to bite the ever-loving shit out of him.

Zagreus slowly, very slowly, raises a hand and lets her smell it. She seems intrigued by whatever he smells like, and he recalls Achilles commenting once that some animals are able to sense beyond the physical realm. He wonders if Korax can smell the chaotic energy coming from him, or if she can literally see

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beyond his physical form.

Or perhaps she just thinks he's weird.

She finally gives his hand a lick, deeming him acceptable, and he pets her with both hands, ignoring how his fingers scream in pain.

Her fur is as soft and thick as it looks. She happily thumps her tail on the floor when he scratches behind her ears, with a *thump thump thump*, and Zagreus is instantly caught by surprise by how much he misses Cerberus in that moment.

Before he can get all gloomy about it, though, Theodore returns with his supplies.

It's not much; according to Theodore, the best way to deal with frostbite is to let the body heal on its own. The key is to make sure to keep warm.

"Don't put your fingers or toes too near the fire, it might hurt more than help," Theodore says, gently nudging his hands a bit farther from the flames.

Zagreus has a moment to think of the irony that is his life; he escaped the constraints of fire only to be burned by the cold, and now he's finding comfort in fire again. At least it's not the fires of hell, lava pools full of screaming souls. Those fires he will be glad to never feel again.

He muses on it for a while as Korax settles beside him, Theodore working on making a hot beverage for him.

"It's salvia, my Lord. It helps with the healing, but most importantly, it will warm you up."

The cup is blissfully warm in his hands, though Zagreus takes care not to touch his fingertips to it. They're still numb, and he really doesn't want to find out what that cold numbness will turn into when met with enough heat to boil water.

Theodore explains that the dark red and the white parts will be easier to deal with, though he might lose whatever turned black. Zagreus already lost a toe, and only the gods know where it is by now.

There's another toe looking like it wants to fall off, hard like a rock and so numb it doesn't even hurt like the others; instead it's more like a block of ice. Zagreus is tempted to speed the process along, morbid curiosity taking a hold of him, though a part of him protests that removing small parts of him, dead or not, may be self-harm.

The cool thing about being immortal, though, is that he doesn't *really* need to worry about his body.

He's pretty sure he can make them grow again, anyway.

Pretty sure.

Mostly pretty sure.

The morbid urge doesn't go away, drowning out the minimal protests of his mostly atrophied self-preservation (a relic from his human part, perhaps?), so Zagreus chooses a finger that seems mostly intact, puts a good amount of strength behind it... and flicks off the offending toe.

It breaks off like glass—or ice—and goes careening on the floor. Korax's ears perk up at the sound, her eyes following the toe as it disappears in a dark corner, but she stays put.

"Huh." That was kind of fun.

He looks up to Theodore, and the man is staring at him with a mixture of shock and amusement that he's seen a few times on Achilles' face before, and Zagreus can't do anything else but laugh, knowing his behaviour must seem baffling and childish.

"Ah," Theodore says, nursing his own cup of warm liquid, "I suppose that's one way of dealing with it."

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“Sorry, that was kinda disgusting wasn’t it?”

“I’ve seen worse, my Lord. You wouldn’t believe the kind of injury people accumulate in the cold.”

“Are you some sort of healer, sir?”

“No, just some old man who knows a lot about things and has enough spare time to help.”

“What do you do for a living, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I would like to say that I’m a farmer, but farming hasn’t been the same in decades. I just try to grow enough things to feed people.”

Zagreus questions him about it, eager to understand how growing things actually works. Maybe he could start his own little garden somewhere, ward off a little corner of the world to make sure no one will be able to find it and plant all kinds of trees and flowers and vegetables.

It would be nice, he thinks, to help things grow instead of destroying them.

He thinks he might like it.

They spend a good couple of hours in conversation while Zagreus silently channels his energy into his body, urging it to heal itself.

A good many topics are covered, including the current state of the world. He’s saddened when he finds out that Theodore has lost his wife and his three children to starvation.

“It’s a slow kind of madness,” Theodore says, eyes distant as he stares into the fire, “to watch the people you love slowly waste away. It stays with you.”

“Is that why you help random strangers?”

“Yes. The cold has already taken too much from this nation. If I can help in little ways, then I will.”

“I appreciate the help, sir, but I’m a little worried you just let any stranger into your house like this.” Zagreus gives him a small smile, trying to chase away some of the darkness on his face. “What if I was an evil spirit, or a vengeful god looking for some dark fun?”

“Ah, but see, evil is only scary when you’ve got things to lose, Lord Zagreus.” Theodore gestures at his house, his clothes, the fire in front of them. “And I haven’t got much.”

“What about Korax?”

“Korax is a wild thing. She’s not a pet. If anything happens to me, she will go back into the forest and find somewhere else to make a home. I am old; she knows I’ll go first. And when her time finally comes, I’m sure she’ll come find me.”

There’s really nothing to say to that, so Zagreus lets the silence linger, comfortable in ways silences around him rarely are.



Morning comes soon enough, bringing with it cold sunlight and two new toes. Zagreus’ fingers and nose are all healed up, and he tests his fingers out by stretching them and picking things up. For his nose, he pinches and pokes it, the lack of pain suggesting it’s fine now. Everything seems in order.

Belatedly, he realizes they both stayed awake the whole night talking. He feels guilty for keeping Theodore up, but the man waves his concern away.

“I’m used to weird hours. My Lord doesn’t have to worry.”

“I really wish you would just call me Zagreus.”

“That would be disrespectful.”

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"You saw me frostbitten like an idiot who's never seen snow before. There's no dignity left to lose, sir."

"Then I must insist you stop calling me sir."

"Deal. What should I call you, then?"

"Theo."

"Alright. You call me Zagreus and we're even."

Theo sighs, the heavy sigh of an old man who knows he's just lost an argument. "As you wish, Zagreus."

Saying goodbye is difficult, again, especially when Korax whines and jumps on his legs, tail wagging with so much force that it shakes her whole body.

"Bye, girl. Be good and take care of Theo, yeah?" Zagreus gives her a good rub, enjoying the simple affection she gives him in return.

He turns to Theo and finds the man observing him. "I haven't had much respect for gods in my life, especially when none of them answered my prayers... but for a god, you're alright, Zagreus."

"Okay, I know the growing toes were a dead give away, but how is it that people keep realizing I'm not a mortal?"

Theo tilts his head at him. "You really don't know?"

"No. I haven't talked to many mortals, honestly. Most of them run away when they realize what I am, or they get so caught up in kneeling and being respectful that it's just impossible to talk to them. And this one time one of them even threatened me! Then there's the weird ones who seem entirely unfazed by me, which is welcomed but baffling all the same."

Zagreus gives Theo a look.

Theo chuckles, voice roughed up by the years. "There's just... something about you. It's hard to explain. You're less flashy

than what I've heard people say about other gods, but there's just no hiding the otherness, I guess. Though divinity is beyond my field of knowledge."

"Ah, well, not sure how much it really matters to be honest. Less fear and worship would be nice, though. Thank you for the help. I'll try not to lose parts of me again."

"See that you do. Wouldn't want my hard work going to waste."

Zagreus gives Korax a last pat on her head, then nods at Theo.

He turns and walks away before he loses his nerve.

It's tempting to stay, to talk more, to listen to Theo's stories of how the world works. Zagreus has been kept away from the surface for so long, he's starved to know everything about it.

But he knows he needs to go.

Gods shouldn't linger, and even though he vows not to be tied down to dumb traditions, he doesn't want to bring misfortune to people just because he gets attached to them.

When he's back on the hill where he fell asleep, he looks back and sees the small forms of Theo and Korax watching him. He gives them a last wave and turns around, disappearing through the trees.

This time, though, he *does* notice the patches of dandelions by Theo's feet before he goes.

And he wonders.



The dandelions start following Zagreus everywhere.

Everywhere.

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They were already annoying enough, sprouting without warning and then refusing to vanish, even when he tried to expunge them away with chthonic energy.

Now they're just... there. All the time.

They sprout where his feet touch the ground, and if he dares to reach for a flower or a blade of grass, suddenly there are dandelions competing for space in his hands, literally pushing each other out of the way to be touched first. It's gotten to the point of whenever he sits or lays down, they form a circle around and under him, as if trying to keep him comfortable.

It would be sweet, if they weren't so *annoying*.

They follow him around for weeks and weeks, until one day he finally sits down and decides to deal with them.

He sits on a patch of ground relatively free of snow and waits, watching as the yellow little buggers burst from the earth as if time moves differently for them, making them grow exponentially faster than they would in normal circumstances.

Zagreus glares.

One of the dandelions sways in his direction, gently bumping him on his knee.

He glares more.

The dandelion is persistent, though. They all are.

It's commendable, really. And way too cute. Plants shouldn't be this cute.

He gives in and picks it up. "Okay," he says, bringing it close to his face and staring it down like an unruly child, "what do you want?"

Then something extraordinary happens.

The little flower morphs right in front of his eyes. It closes itself to the world for a second, the whole flower head

shrinking in on itself, as if protecting its delicate petals. It loses some of its shine during that split second, its lush green darkening, parts of it recoiling in on themselves.

For a moment, Zagreus is afraid that he may have killed the flower, perhaps by channeling energy into it without realizing.

But then it starts to reopen, and when it does, the yellow petals have given way to white; dozens of thin, wispy white things, looking so fragile that a gust of wind would blow them away. Each one of them is attached at the base by a small brown kernel, which he's pretty sure is a seed.

Dozens of seeds.

It's beautiful, actually. (He's taken over by gratitude, again, that he gets to experience all of this now.)

One of the seeds detaches itself from the rest, the wind blowing it on his face. It lands on his nose, and he crosses his eyes to stare at it, utterly taken by its simple beauty.

~if I could get just one plant to grow, things could get a little better around here~

The voice startles him so much that he jerks back, almost losing sight of the seed as it dislodges from him.

He scrambles for it, trying to grab it in his hand before it's lost in the wind.

What was that?

He looks at the little seed with newly found interest, urging it to whisper to him again.

And it does.

~if I could get just one plant to grow, things could get a little better around here~

It's a feminine voice, a little reminiscent of Persephone's. But this one sounds younger and tired, desperate.

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~if I could get just one plant to grow, things could get a little better around here~

The sentence repeats over and over, faint, as fragile as the seed carrying it.

It's a wish.

Someone wished for something, and the little seed carried it to him.

He looks at the flower he dropped on the ground in his desperation to save the little seed. Some of the other seeds have detached themselves as well, but instead of being blown away, they hover in the air near the flower.

As if they're waiting for him.

He picks the dandelion up, floating seeds following behind it with a little bit of a delay. Some childish part of him takes over for a moment and he shakes the flower around, watching as the seeds dance after it.

"Okay," he whispers, a little bit afraid but mostly in awe, "and what do I do with you, now?"

The little seed approaches him again, dancing in front of his face.

~if I could get just one plant to grow, things could get a little better around here~

He closes his eyes and lets instinct guide him.

The power inside him sparks to life for the first time, bright and loud, a burst of energy very different from the times he's been using it to keep himself warm, or to heal himself, or to cross over a mountain in seconds. It twists and turns, like it's uncoiling itself from a long slumber, happy that he's finally putting it to good use.

It reaches beyond him, beyond his body and this physical

plane, and touches down on the other side of Greece, on a lonely farm. Zagreus watches the woman looking over her vegetable garden, sadness plain on the set of her shoulders as she searches the swath of bare earth for any sign of life.

Just one plant, right?

Zagreus pushes his power into the land, the energy eager to get to work. It nestles in the soft, cold earth, taking hold of the dead roots of one of the seedlings that never broke the surface. Nothing appears to happen above the earth, but Zagreus knows it's there, and he knows this farmer will have a little bit of a shock when she wakes up tomorrow.

Satisfied, he disconnects, falling back into his body. It's like falling onto a bed, soft but abrupt at the same time, almost knocking the breath out of him. He opens his eyes—didn't even realize he closed them—and finds the other dandelions gathered around him, waving back and forth as if trying to get his attention.

They must be happy, now that he's finally figured out what they're for. Or maybe he's just putting too much expectation on dandelion behavior. They're only plants after all, no matter how magical they seem.

They also seem incredibly eager, falling over each other to get to him, trying to climb his legs with their roots and stems and leaves, bumping into and knocking each other off in the process.

Ugh, he's going to have to take care of all of them now, isn't he?



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To the surprise of absolutely no one, Zagreus gets exhausted after five wishes and falls asleep on the spot.

Well, at least this place doesn't have as much snow. Plus, the dandelions are very comfortable.



Time becomes even more inconsequential than it ever was for him.

His time is divided between exploring, granting wishes, and falling asleep in strange places. (He does try to keep all his body parts, though.)

At one point he sees Thanatos around the base of a mountain, looking haggard in a way Zagreus has never seen before. He seems to be looking for something, or someone, and for a split second Zagreus is almost sure they lock eyes; then Thanatos looks away, as if Zagreus isn't there at all, and he runs away before that can be rectified.

He's torn between believing his father would send people looking for him, to drag him back, and thinking that Hades just wouldn't care at all, and maybe Thanatos is looking for him of his own volition.

Whatever the case, Zagreus doesn't care to be found. Hell, maybe Thanatos isn't even looking for him. It's not the first time Death would have to contend with people trying to run from him, after all.

Besides, Thanatos isn't the one he wants to see the most; *that* one never leaves the House, though, so his wish is a waste of time.

(Ironic, that he can grant other people's wishes but not his own.)



A training session going wrong is not the way Zagreus thought he was going to find out about his blood, but here he is.

He's been getting antsy lately, getting random urges to have a blade in his hand. He had to leave all his weapons back at the House; he couldn't risk bringing one or two and leaving himself open to being found through them.

He doesn't even know if that would be possible, but he's never been one to doubt the powers of divine tools and weapons.

It was the best choice, really, but he still misses them.

He finds himself in an open field, no farms or houses in sight, and decides to test out some of his powers. He needs to figure this out, sooner or later, and he'd rather not get caught by a surprise fight without knowing what to expect from himself.

The main problem is that he doesn't even know where to start.

He has no weapons, has never had any type of energy training until right now, and not even Chaos could predict what he may be able to do.

So, lacking a teacher, he copies people he knows, and the random warriors he's seen through the Underworld, and even the heroes he only read about in old books.

He tries concentrating energy in his hands, but fails. Tries making a weapon out of energy, and fails too. He even tries just moving the energy through his body, in hopes of at least enhancing his physical strength and speed beyond what he's

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been able to do until now.

But he fails at that, too.

It's not that the energy isn't there; it is. It's just that it seems weak, distant, unable to break the surface of his skin. It's as if he's used most of it already.

Which is bullshit.

Whenever he grants a wish, his powers are clearly there. He *feels* the wishes happening, feels it in his very core, the energy ebbing and flowing like ocean waves.

But as soon as he concentrates on anything else, nothing.

Frustrated, he punches the nearest boulder, shouting his pain to the winds when he feels something crack in his hand.

Ouch.

He looks at his right hand, already annoyed even before seeing the damage, and is caught by surprise at what he finds there.

He has two broken fingers, which is actually not surprising; the skin is broken, which is also not surprising... but there's no blood.

No red. No sign of his mortal heritage.

Instead, what flows out of the wound is black. Black like the night, like the sea of stars inside Chaos' domain. It glitters with tiny little stars inside, like his wound has opened a tiny portal to another dimension.

It's disconcerting and awe inspiring in equal measures.

His blood is black now.

He stares at it as its flow slows down, the cut closing on its own. When his skin is intact again, the blood slowly disappears in the air, fading away into nothing.

It's hard to figure out how he feels about this news. On one

hand, having red blood had always marked him as other, as different, as something to be looked at with trepidation. (With disdain.) On the other hand, red blood has always been something intrinsically his and his alone, something no one else had until he found out about Persephone; and then it became a connection between them, something they shared, something he had gotten from her, almost like a present.

On a metaphorical third hand, it's not like having a connection had made a difference to her, in the end.

He should... mourn this, maybe. Acknowledge the change, feel the pain of it, and let it go.

He should.

But running away is much easier, and he has so many distractions now—it's hard to convince himself to sit down and sift through his emotions.

So he doesn't.



This is probably the dumbest thing Hypnos has ever done.

Dumber than the time he thought sleeping near a lava pool was a good idea, and almost lost a foot; dumber than the time he tried to pet Cerberus' other heads and almost got chomped on; dumber than the time he tried to switch Megaera's whip for Thanatos' scythe to see if they'd notice.

Dumber than the time he tried to make a plushie for Zagreus and pricked all his fingers, and the thing came out all wonky and ugly. He'd buried it under a tree in his domain out of embarrassment and vowed to never let it see the light of day.

This... this takes the cake.

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He floats after the black poppies, and as they go from domain to chthonic web to mortal realm, the poppies slowly morph into flowers of all types in front of him, as if the person creating them doesn't really care about the type of flower. As if poppies were just a way to get his attention.

This is so stupid.

Hypnos will probably regret this, most likely sooner rather than later.

The flowers lead him to the surface, to a snowy white Greece, the cold biting his skin before he has the chance to ward himself against it.

He should at least let someone know where he's going. The thought of talking to Mom or Thanatos is unbearable right now, though. Maybe he could send a warning to Dusa? Or Achilles. Hell, even Megaera would be suitable.

But he doesn't. And he doesn't know why.

It'd be the smart thing to do. The situation is clearly dangerous; whoever or whatever is leading him is probably the one responsible for Zagreus' death, and he wouldn't be surprised if they're lying to him in order to get him, too.

But it's such a sweet, sweet lie.

Zagreus is alive. Zagreus is hurt. Zagreus needs his help.

He wants so badly to believe it.

Part of him is screaming to get away, to flee the entity who's even now observing him. Hypnos can feel eyes following his movements, thinks he can see shadows out of the corner of his eyes, but when he looks directly at them, they're not there.

Another part of him seems like it's not there at all. Numb. Unfeeling.

(Another part of him, bigger and stronger than he would

like, wants *revenge*. Wants to grab this entity by the neck and rip it apart, only keeping them alive long enough to level the pillars of their mind. Madness is the least they deserve for what they did. Hypnos wants to watch them struggle in his grasp in the same way they probably made Zagreus struggle, wants to ask why why *why* did you take him away?)

This is stupid, and he's going to regret it... but he keeps following the flowers as they take to the sky and lead him away, his wings unfurling to keep up with them. He looks down briefly, just in time to see the gate of the Temple of the Styx disappearing under the clouds.

He didn't realize they were so close. Hopefully no one sensed him.

They pass mountains and rivers all blanketed in a thick layer of snow, everything long frozen in the fury of an eternal winter. It doesn't take long to reach their destination, and by then they've covered half of Greece.

It looks like a little clearing in the middle of the woods, though it's hard to see through the canopy of trees. The ghostly path of flowers starts descending towards it, like an outstretched hand, and as he gets closer he sees small patches of... dandelions? He's pretty sure they're called dandelions, though he's never seen so many in one place before. They're in full bloom, a bright and vibrant yellow almost painfully contrasting against the muted environment. The patches seem almost arranged in a formation, rather than the erratic patterns that flowers usually take in the wild.

It doesn't take long for him to realize why.

There, in the middle of the dandelions, surrounded by yellow and white and dark green, is Zagreus.

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Zagreus.

The breath is knocked out of him so suddenly that it's almost like his lungs collapse.

There he is.

There he is.

Hypnos is touching his feet to the ground and running before he realizes what he's doing, blanket belatedly following after him. He skids to his knees, snow soaking his chiton, the cold seeping through his skin like it's reaching for his heart, to shackle it with too-tight chains of ice.

His very being is filled with fear, like he's never felt before. What if it's an illusion? A sick joke? What if it is Zagreus, but just his corpse?

Please be alive please be alive please be alive—

Zagreus is cold and too still, and all Hypnos wants is for him to open his eyes. *Please.*

He has a moment of blank panic, trying to remember how to check if someone's alive, running what he knows about Zagreus's body through his mind. It's too little, far too little.

He places a hand on Zagreus' chest and waits, hoping for a heartbeat, hoping that Zagreus' body even has one to begin with, and why the hell has he never asked Zagreus if he has a heartbeat would that've been weird that would have been weird, wouldn't it—

There's a second of shock, as every sound hushes down.

ba dum

ba dum

Oh. Oh, thank the gods and the Fates and whatever else is out there listening.

Hypnos collapses on Zagreus' chest with a heavy, wet sigh

that almost turns into a sob, and lets a few tears slip out.

Here he is.

Here he is, alive, heartbeat steady—he has a heartbeat!—and... way, way too cold.

Hypnos springs up in surprise and horror, finally registering where they are and the state Zagreus is in. He blindly feels for his blanket, roughly grabbing it and pulling it closer. With the help of the blanket's magically-powered movements, he maneuvers Zagreus' body until the blanket's under him, commanding it to float to get Zagreus out of the snow.

Looking around, there doesn't seem to be any kind of shelter. No houses, no temples. Why was he here, anyway?

Hypnos bites his lips. He needs to get Zagreus out of the cold. Normally the low temperature wouldn't be a problem, but Zagreus has always been more susceptible to changes in the environment. Mortals can have something called hypothermia, if Hypnos remembers the name right, where someone can die from too much cold. He doesn't want to find out if Zagreus can experience something similar.

Zagreus has always been strangely susceptible to mortal ailments, after all.

There's no telling what hypothermia might do to him, but Hypnos has a sinking feeling that he'd die and be dragged off somewhere else. Months ago, this wouldn't be a problem, but now he can't be sure where Zagreus might end up. He can't risk losing sight of him, can't risk having Zagreus return to wherever he's been all this time. Can't risk losing him again.

Something is different. Hypnos can feel it in how Zagreus' power pulses in waves along the chthonic web—where before his presence was energy and life itself, now something restless

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and old beats in time with change. He wonders if this difference has anything to do with the one who brought him here, but he shelves that thought for later.

Zagreus needs to be warmed up, but he doesn't want to risk using his own abilities for that until after he knows what exactly has changed. Although Zagreus is clearly paler and wearing less vibrant colors, the alterations of his physical form on a more existential level are unclear. Hell, he could be allergic to chthonic magic now, for all Hypnos knows. It's bad enough that Hypnos doesn't know much about how his biology had worked before.

That's besides the point, though. Right now, Zagreus needs help.

He gives himself half a second to mourn the loss of the red clothes, before he makes a decision.

They can't stay here.

Hypnos grabs one of Zagreus' hands and squeezes it tightly, relishing the feel of those fingers on his, not caring that they feel like ice right now.

Then, he pulls the veil of the mortal realm down, chthonic energy flowing through and around them, and teleports them both to his domain.

In an instant, they're standing in his field of poppies.

Hypnos lowers Zagreus to the ground, making sure the blanket is wrapped securely around him. He's still incredibly cold, but his breathing seems normal now. Hypnos cranks up the ambient temperature anyway, hoping that the indirect power usage won't affect Zagreus in a bad way.

Once that's done, he sits beside him, hand still clutching Zagreus' much colder one.

There's a moment of stillness, then something knocks on the metaphorical walls of his domain. Confused, Hypnos lifts his head and watches the horizon. It's rather unusual for anyone to seek him out.

It's the same entity from before, but at least this time they don't barge in.

They're knocking. How polite.

Hypnos allows the connection, and immediately asks, "What do you want?"

to see him

"If you've come to hurt him— "

if I wanted him hurt, I would have kept him away from you

Hypnos shivers. "Are you threatening me?"

no. I am stating a fact. I do not wish harm upon you or zagreus, which is why I led you to him

Hypnos doesn't know what to think. On one hand, the entity admitted they had killed Zagreus—even though they claimed to have been fulfilling his wish. On the other hand, they did lead him to Zagreus when they didn't need to.

Not only that, they could enter Hypnos' domain without any trouble, so they could have killed Hypnos at any point, if they'd wanted to. They could have killed Zagreus at any point, as well. In fact, it would've been significantly easier for them to kill Zagreus, entering his domain without his permission should've been much more impossible because of the extensive protections he has layered all over it.

You always knew Zagreus wanted out. Is it so hard to believe he wished for it all to end?

For once, the dark voice says something decent. Hypnos has spent the last few months putting together every conversation

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and facial expression he could remember, painting the horrible picture that had brought him to his breaking point two days ago. Achilles bringing up his suspicions had just been the final straw.

He had long arrived at the conclusion that Zagreus knew exactly what he was doing. Zagreus wanted to leave, permanently, and he had found a way to do it, because of course he did.

And then he left without saying anything.

He let everyone believe he was dead.

Hypnos should be angry, but instead he's just hurt. The black hole that's been slowly feeding on his misery stretches a little more, gobbling up so much of him that Hypnos is briefly overwhelmed, afraid he might disappear at one point.

Disappearing wouldn't be so bad. (He understands how Zagreus feels, no matter how painful it is to be on the side that's left behind.)

A small groan catches his attention, and his eyes snap to the bundle in front of him.

Zagreus' face contorts like he's having a nightmare, and for a moment, Hypnos is afraid to touch him, to use any kind of power on him. Although it's slight, there's a chance that Zagreus might simply disintegrate under his touch, under the barest use of chthonic energy.

But Zagreus' face contorts even more, and he starts struggling against the blanket, almost frantically, in a way that Hypnos can't bear to stand by and watch any longer.

He hesitates for a second, then lays a hand on Zagreus' cheek. He gives the nightmare a little nudge. Not enough to push it aside, but enough for Zagreus' own mind to get rid of it,

morphing it into a pleasant dream.

To his relief, nothing happens besides Zagreus' frown disappearing as he stills.

Hypnos sighs, hoping he'll have a nice rest.

Then Zagreus opens his eyes.

Hypnos starts, blinking down at him in surprise. The first thing he registers is the new eye, and a thousand questions want to spill from his mouth, but then he stops and really looks. Zagreus seems... not all there. His eyes are cloudy, as if half of him is still asleep, but he looks up and his eyes zero in on Hypnos with precision. Like they had been looking for him, specifically.

They stare at each other for a moment, Zagreus' eyes roaming over Hypnos like he's never seen him before. It's a heady feeling, having Zagreus' gaze on him, unerringly, with purpose.

Zagreus meets his eyes once again, with something almost reverent in his gaze.

"You have wings," he says, slurring a bit, but voice so full of wonder that Hypnos finds himself blushing.

"Yes," he answers automatically, then he registers the question and looks down at himself with a start. He's in full chthonic god mode, all six wings out, both pairs of arms and both pairs of eyes, so yes, he does indeed have visible wings. He reaches up with a hand to his hair, feeling for the wings there. Correction: eight wings out.

It dawns on him, then, that Zagreus has never seen him like this. Self-consciousness grabs him suddenly, shaking him roughly and making him want to hide everything he is. He shrinks a bit into himself out of habit, but one look at Zagreus'

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face, and he sees the awe still there.

“You have arms,” Zagreus says, tone rising in pitch as the amazement seems to rise with it.

His unease subsides as he takes the situation in, lips twitching in an aborted laugh as he answers, “Yes.” He does indeed have arms.

“And you have eyes.”

“Also yes.”

Zagreus smiles, and even though he looks kinda drunk and half-asleep, it still warms Hypnos to the core. “You’re so beautiful.”

Then he promptly falls back asleep, head lolling back in a way that can’t be comfortable.

Hypnos stares at Zagreus’ slack face, subconsciously adjusting his neck back into a more comfortable position. Did he just...?

He can feel the ichor boiling in his veins, face burning gold, wings fluttering behind him. Something bubbles up from his chest, excited to get out. Hypnos opens his mouth to let it out and starts laughing.

He’s so surprised by it that he falls on Zagreus’ chest again, resting his forehead against black fabric as he laughs. Soon enough, his laughter turns into sobs, the tears impossible to stop once they start coming.

Hypnos sobs, loud enough that he worries he might wake Zagreus up, but the prince keeps sleeping, blissfully unaware.

He laughs and cries until his tears dry up and, for the first time in months, the black hole inside him shrinks. Just a tiny bit.

Lifting his head, he stares down at Zagreus’ unfairly

handsome face, a slight smile still on his lips. He closes the distance between them and drops a kiss on his forehead, his last few tears sliding down his cheek and falling on Zagreus' skin, staining it with faint streaks of gold.

Between a few stray chuckles, he mutters, "I missed you so much."

Bundling Zagreus up in the blanket again, he brings him close, resting Zagreus' head on his lap. He will watch over him until he recovers, and then they will talk. Hypnos has questions he wants answers to, and he feels like he deserves at least some of them. (He also just really, really wants to hear Zagreus' voice. For hours. Days. Forever, really, though that may be too selfish.)

And if Hypnos keeps randomly crying and laughing while he waits, well, that's his business.



He loses track of time.

It's easy to do that, when he's not actively keeping tabs on the cycle of sun and moon. The fact that domains are usually static helps with that; there's no day-night cycle in Hypnos' domain, so it's easy to get lost if he spends too long here.

He *could* add a day-night cycle, though. If he wanted to.

Hm. Something to think about.

Meanwhile, Zagreus sleeps on. He looks extremely comfortable inside Hypnos' blanket cocoon, head still pillowed on his lap because Hypnos will be damned if he moves.

At some point he falls asleep sitting there with Zagreus, so he takes the opportunity to tend to a few dreams here and there. When he wakes up again, Zagreus is still asleep.

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He must have been exhausted.

Has he been running all this time? Living in fear that he's going to be found and dragged back to the Underworld? Which is incredibly possible, knowing Hades, so Zagreus' fears are based on a strong mixture of reality and experience.

Oh, Zagreus. Even after escaping, he didn't really escape, did he?

Hypnos runs a hand through dark hair and vows, then and there, to never let anyone take Zagreus anywhere he doesn't want to go ever again.

A couple of minutes pass by, where a single white poppy sprouts right beside Hypnos' knees and tries to climb it, reaching for Zagreus. Hypnos gently slaps it away, giving it a warning stare, and the poppy droops, returning to its place among the others. It still sways ever so slightly in Zagreus' direction, though.

Stubborn little thing.

(Hypnos conveniently ignores how everything inside this space is a reflection of himself.)

He's starting to lose himself in his thoughts when Zagreus stirs in his lap. As he watches, Zagreus' eyes open again—seriously, that eye has something incredibly familiar about it, though he's not sure what—with much more awareness than before as he takes in his surroundings. The other eye is still the same soft green it was before, now looking significantly less unnatural and out of place compared to before his death-that-wasn't-a-death.

Zagreus takes a deep breath, looking from Hypnos to the sky, then the far horizon and back again.

Hypnos blinks.

Zagreus blinks back.

And everything is silent for a while as time seems to come to a standstill.

Two seconds, five seconds. Then Zagreus leaps up as if burned, untangling himself from the blanket in a smooth move that reveals the kind of warrior he really is; cautious and always alert, always aware of everything, even when he doesn't need to be.

Hypnos gets up too, so he can better meet his eyes.

Zagreus steps a meter or so away, eyes wide but face set in determination and something raw. He glances at Hypnos from head to toe, taking in their surroundings briefly before focusing on him again.

Oh. Hypnos finally recognizes that look, that stance.

Zagreus is tense, ready to run at the first show of a threat. He's *scared*.

Hypnos' heart breaks a little at that, but he understands. He falls back down onto the grass, getting comfortable with his legs crossed and the blanket back around his shoulders, wings curling into his back and around his torso for comfort.

Zagreus watches with focused eyes, keeping careful tabs on Hypnos' movements.

Hypnos wants to ask so many things, wants to hug him and scream at him and hug him again and ask him to never do something like that again—or at least let Hypnos know next time.

But he starts small.

"Hey, Zag."

Zagreus' expression barely moves, but he makes an aborted motion forward, like he wants to step closer. He doesn't move,

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though. Doesn't talk. The spooked expression doesn't leave his face.

"Uhm..." Hypnos continues, desperate to keep him from running, "I found you? In the snow?"

Zagreus tilts his head. "In the snow?"

Ah. Hearing his voice is so good, when he's not spouting sweet nothings in his sleep. Hypnos forces himself not to react. "Yeah. Something or someone led me to you. They said you were hurt."

Zagreus avoids his eyes a little, puts a hand on his neck. "Tsk. Nosy," he mutters, sounding exasperated and fond in equal measure.

Hypnos feels a sudden surge of irrational jealousy, and it takes considerable effort to not let it bleed out into their surroundings. His sky is still dark, the eternal promise of storm, but he's sure he sees some clouds move closer, faster, darkening a little bit more than usual.

Back off, back off, he thinks at them.

They still, for now, but don't leave. He's really starting to regret taking Zagreus into the one place where he can't hide his emotions behind a mask of pleasantries.

Hypnos looks back up at Zagreus and finds himself being watched.

He doesn't want to put a name on the emotions he's seeing, because it would be wishful thinking, but Hypnos feels warm at the way Zagreus' eyes take him in anyway, like... he's everything he wanted to see.

Hypnos runs a hand over his face, telling himself to stop projecting.

"Did my father send you?"

The question gets him by surprise. A cold, bitter surprise. Did Zagreus actually think...?

“What?” he asks, voice low. He doesn’t want to sound angry, but he knows he fails when Zagreus takes a step back. Hypnos’ heartbeat spikes at that.

“My father. He’s been sending people to look for me, right? Did he send you, too?”

Hypnos takes a moment to breathe, to calm down, before allowing himself to respond. “Didn’t I just tell you something led me to you?”

“Well, yeah, but you could have been out looking for me alrea—”

“How could I have been looking for you, when I thought you were dead?”

“...What?”

And just like that, Hypnos’ composure falls to the ground and shatters. “I thought you were dead!” He shouts, getting up and moving toward Zagreus.

Zagreus’ eyes widen in surprise and something like fear (oh no, Hypnos never wanted him to fear him—), taking several steps back, with that same, terrible, caged look returning, his eyes frantic and wild with desperate energy.

But Hypnos doesn’t stop, and he doesn’t let Zagreus put distance between them. He grabs him by the chiton—black, plain, nothing like what he used to wear—and pulls him until they’re face to face, noses touching. It’s reminiscent of his fight with Thanatos, but the feelings are entirely different, and Hypnos would never, ever hurt him.

“I thought you were dead,” he whispers, hearing his voice break. “I thought I was never going to see you again because

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you left and died and never bothered to tell me in advance, you asshole.”

Zagreus keeps his silence, but his face says it all. Surprise, dismay, and maybe a hint of regret? It’s a little hard to read him from this close, black and green eyes morphing and smudging together.

A hand comes up to his face and Hypnos startles as it touches his cheek, wiping away the tears he didn’t even notice were already falling.

“I’m sorry,” Zagreus whispers back, voice like the shards of broken glass piercing Hypnos’ heart.

It’s almost gratifying to hear that tone, to know that Zagreus takes no pleasure in making him and the others suffer, even though he’s the one who left in the first place.

“I thought you were gone,” Hypnos says, unable to stop talking.

“Hypnos, I’m sorry.”

“I thought I was never gonna see you again. How could you do that? How could you? You left without saying goodbye. You knew you were leaving permanently. You went away to *kill yourself*, and I... I...”

The hand on his cheek leaves, and soon there’s a pair of arms around him, strong, making him feel secure even as he breaks again.

“I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry,” Zagreus repeats, voice wobbling and slightly choked by emotion.

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Yes.”

“A fucking bastard.”

A strangled laugh. “Yes, I am.”

“You left.”

“I did.”

“You left and didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You—” Hypnos isn’t even sure of what else he’s going to say, because at that moment his tears decided is time to start flowing, and all that leaves him is a sob.

And then he just can’t stop.

He hugs Zagreus back as a hand comes up to his head, burying itself in his curls and bringing his face to Zagreus’ shoulders. Hypnos is taller than Zagreus by half a head, but at this moment he feels small, fragile, like a little poppy in the middle of a storm. And Zagreus is the port, strong and firm and immovable, ready to catch him at the slightest wobble.

The arm around his waist tightens as Hypnos sobs loudly, uncaring of the scene he’s making. There’s no need for composure, even if he could manage it; no one’s here but them. Even the mysterious entity has left them for now.

He doesn’t count the time he spends there in Zagreus’ arms, doesn’t want to put in numbers this thing he thought he would never have again. He just hopes they will stay like this for a long, long while.

(They do.)



When Hypnos’ tears stop, he opens his eyes, finally registering what’s happened to his domain.

It’s raining.

The storm that has been threatening to fall, hanging around

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his domain like the physical manifestation of his compartmentalized grief and fear, like an ultimatum, has finally come. It falls cold and golden on them, soaking their clothes and leaving a chill in the air.

Hypnos shivers. Then he remembers exactly who he's holding and why they're here in the first place.

He gasps, shoving Zagreus away from him with hands on his shoulders. "I'm so sorry! I didn't realize it was raining! I'm sorry, I know you're cold, I'll make it stop, don't worry here take my blanket"—he takes his blanket off and shoves it into Zagreus' arms—"be sure to cover yourself well, I don't want you getting sick gods know how your body works now *why are you smiling?*"

Zagreus has had a smile slowly forming on his face since Hypnos started speaking, but now it blooms into a full-blown grin (gorgeous, it's gorgeous), white teeth gleaming in the low light. "Hypnos, just breathe for a moment, okay?"

Oh.

It's such a simple sentence. *Hypnos, breathe.* It's not even that he's heard it a lot, since he and Zagreus barely talked for centuries, but. But.

Oh, he's crying again.

Hypnos absently contemplates how much he can cry before he's nothing but a dried husk on the ground, but those thoughts don't matter when Zagreus' face softens like that, when he brings his hand up to Hypnos' cheeks and tries to wipe the tears away, no matter how futile it is.

Zagreus is drenched to the bone, looking like someone up-ended a can of golden paint on him. The rain glitters on his skin, the gold sliding down the black clothes and bringing back a little bit of the flair he's clearly left behind. Hypnos stands

there and just takes it in, the way Zagreus changed and didn't change at all, how the muted colors do nothing to dampen his kind smile and kinder eyes.

"How about we sit down, hm? You can tell me what's been going on and I'll tell you where I've been?" He ends his sentence in a question, as if unsure, as if Hypnos doesn't want to know every little detail of how and when and *who*.

But most importantly, he wants to soak up the way Zagreus shines now. It's not related to the power he's putting off, even though he's buzzing like a hive.

No, he just shines because he looks happy, if a little lost. It's in his smile and his laughter, and just in general how *relaxed* he is, now.

He looks happy, and seeing him now makes Hypnos realize just how miserable he had looked before. Now he has something to compare it to. If Zagreus looks like this when he's happy, then Hypnos is going to make sure no one can intrude on it ever again, because for the first time since he's ever known him, Zagreus is *glowing*. He looks healthier than he's ever been in the Underworld.

He looks *free*, even if the threat of Hades waiting to drag him back may never disappear. It's just so, so much, and it's *wonderful*.

He sits down and Zagreus follows, sitting beside him, turned toward Hypnos like the poppies on the ground turn towards Zagreus.

Oh, he *really* hopes Zagreus doesn't notice the rebellious poppies. That's going to be hard to explain without being honest, and being honest would be mortifying. Hypnos would rather not have to deal with that. Ever.

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"So, what has been happening in the House?"

Hypnos breathes in, breathes out. "Oh, you know, nothing much. Just everyone on edge because the Prince has apparently been killed and his soul's being held hostage somewhere by something incredibly powerful that didn't even have the decency of showing its name on the ledger."

Zagreus doesn't tell him to breathe, this time. Instead, he winces, eyes skittering away and coming back to Hypnos with what might be regret.

"Yeah, uh... sorry?" he asks.

Hypnos narrows his eyes at him. Not quite a glare, but making it clear that answer is seriously lacking.

Zagreus winces again, even as his smile doesn't really vanish. "Okay, okay. If I tell you where I've been and what I've been doing, will you stop being angry at me?"

Hypnos hums, enjoying the way Zagreus looks like this is important to him, like Hypnos' anger is something that hurts him.

"Hmm, I guess we'll see." Hypnos smiles, mischievous. "Maybe I'll be more forgiving if you tell me who helped you, first."

Zagreus hesitates for a moment, and Hypnos almost retracts it. He doesn't have the right to know, per se, but he would like to. He wants to know everything about Zagreus.

And they've wasted enough time already, haven't they?

"Oh, well... it was Master Chaos," Zagreus says, with the levity of someone saying what they had for breakfast.

What?

"What?"

"Uh, didn't I tell you about them?"

"No?" This can't be. "When you say Master Chaos, do you mean..."
No way. "Do you mean the creator of everything? *That* Chaos?"

There's just no way.

How could Zagreus have met them? Why would they concern themselves with Zagreus' plight?

"Yeah, that's exactly who I mean."

Oh, by the gods.

Hypnos groans, slapping all his four hands on his face. "I threatened my grandparent."

"What?"

"I threatened them! Oh gods, Zag, I am so dead! I'm gonna be grounded for eternity, oh no."

Zagreus chuckles, unable to comprehend Hypnos' mortification. "I'm sure you had a good reason."

Well.

He did.

"I mean, I certainly did, but that doesn't change the fact that I was rude, and dismissive, and would have been even violent if I could! Oh noes, oh noes, this isn't good."

"Hypnos, I rather doubt Master Chaos would do anything to hurt you. But, uhm... why were you rude, anyway?"

"I thought they had killed you!"

"They did, kinda."

"Zag, I'm serious! When they entered my domain, I was all angry and growly and I cussed at them"—he groans again—"Mom can never find out, I'll never hear the end of it."

"I won't tell if you don't."

Hypnos takes a hand away from his face to point at Zagreus. "You! You think this is funny, don't you?"

Zagreus grins, all teeth, bright and beautiful. "I sure do."

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Hypnos smiles back, helplessly, freeing his face from his hands. "Okay, it's a little bit funny."

"So what were the cuss words? Tell me."

Hypnos groans. "No."

"Hypnos, tell me."

"Nope."

"C'mon, you can't leave me like this."

"You're just gonna have to suffer. Consider it a little bit of payback."

Zagreus sighs, leaning back on his hands. "Fine, fine. I can't argue with that one."

Hypnos watches him as he watches the sky. The breeze gently ruffles his hairs and his clothes, and Hypnos wants this moment to last forever.

"Huh."

"What is it?"

"That cloud's moving kinda weird."

Hypnos looks up and, sure enough, there's a cloud in the distance. It's big and fluffy and pink, and it's moving in their direction.

Well, it's more like dancing its way over.

Ah.

Gods.

Gods and everything in between, can his mind stop trying to embarrass him for one minute?

Hypnos tells the cloud to get a grip and stay where it is. He watches the fluffy thing stop, waver in place, move a little forward again, then stop completely.

He sends the flowers another warning, too, for good measure.

When he turns back, Zagreus is looking at him with curiosity shining on his face.

Shit.

If Zagreus asks, Hypnos knows he's going to talk. He won't be able to say no, won't be able to deny Zagreus with his shining eyes and earnest questions.

But Zagreus simply watches him, a collection of feelings passing quickly through his face. Hypnos can't parse them all, but they seem fine enough.

Zagreus shifts, leans forward again, this time resting his elbows on his knees.

"You look... different."

Hypnos startles a little, caught unaware by the change in subject.

"Ah, yeah, this— y'know that we have, like, vessels and all, right?"

Zagreus nods. "Master Chaos explained it a little bit."

"Right, so what you used to see in the house was just my basic vessel. The appearance that my being chose for me when I was born. But this"—Hypnos gestures at himself—"this is the actual me in physical form."

"Does everyone have something like that?"

"You mean, gods? All the chthonic ones, I'd say."

"And the Olympians don't?"

"As far as I understand it, everyone has a vessel. A few of us just have other appearances underneath."

"So this is you?"

"Most of me, yeah."

"...Most?"

"Well, this is still a physical realm, kind of. And therefore I

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need a physical form. Being... erm, incorporeal takes too much energy on physical planes."

"So if we were to go to a non-physical plane, whatever that means, I could see your actual true form?"

"Hm, yeah! Though we might not wanna do that."

"Why not?"

"Zag, I don't think your body would survive the trip."

"We could just leave it behind."

"...What?"

"Yeah, when Master Chaos remade me, I could move without my body. I'm sure I can do it again."

"When Gran Chaos did *what*?"

"You call them Gran Chaos? Aww, Hypnos, that's so cute!"

"Shut up!" Hypnos shouts, feeling his cheeks warm up. "Answer the question!"

Zagreus laughs, bright and loud in a way Hypnos has rarely seen from him.

What a novelty.

"Okay, so I..."

Zagreus explains, briefly, what he set out to do, and what Chaos suggested instead, and what they ended up agreeing on, and Hypnos wants to simultaneously hug and slap them both.

He could do it. He has the arms for it.

But he settles for slapping Zagreus' arm over and over. "I can't fucking believe you."

"Ouch. Hearing you curse is so bizar—ouch!"

"Shut up."

Zagreus chuckles at that, allowing Hypnos his small moment of violence. Hypnos soaks the sound up like a flower in the sun.

"You know," Hypnos says, rubbing his hand where he was slapping Zagreus, completely missing the look he gets for it, "you being partly human makes a lot of sense."

"Right? When Master Chaos told me, suddenly things fell into place."

Hypnos tells Zagreus of his observations, how he always seemed more prone to the heat and the cold, and how the red blood always seemed incredibly suspicious.

"Yeah, no red blood anymore," Zagreus says. It's hard to read the inflection on his voice, but Hypnos thinks he can detect a hint of sadness.

"Wait, really?" he asks, wanting to erase that look from Zagreus' face, but knowing he shouldn't. It's healthy to feel the not so good feelings too. "How do you know?"

Zagreus gives him his signature mischievous smile. "How do you think? I tested it, of course."

"...Zag, did you stab yourself?"

"Punched a boulder out of frustration, actually."

Hypnos can't help it; he laughs. It's not even that funny, but it's just so Zagreus. After months of living in doubt and fear and the slow realization of death, Zagreus is here with him, sitting inside his domain, smiling like sunshine and being his usual playful self with very little survival instincts.

A little tear escapes the corner of one eye, but Hypnos wipes it away before it's noticed.

"Okay, so... you've been trying to figure out what's new with you, right?"

"Yes! I've been trying to test my new abilities, but it's been very hard. I'm just not used to *having* abilities, I guess."

He sounds a little embarrassed at that.

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"I can always help you."

"Really?"

"Of course! I don't wanna see you passed out in the cold again."

Zagreus rubs a hand on his neck, a subtle blush rising on his cheeks. "The cold has been really hard to deal with. If I'm not constantly vigilant, I start getting cold. I even got frostbite once!"

"What's... frostbite?"

"Oh, it's when a part of you gets so cold that it kind of dies? And you lose it."

Hypnos stares at him, horrified.

Zagreus puts his hands in front of him, as if to halt Hypnos' thoughts. "But I'm fine, I promise! I only lost two toes, but they grew back!"

Hypnos slaps a hand on his face. "By sheer dumb luck, I bet."

Zagreus laughs.

They stay there for a while, Zagreus recounting the things he's seen and done, which are not as much as Hypnos was expecting.

"What do you mean, you get exhausted easily?"

"Ah, well... I don't know how to explain, I'm just always tired. Sometimes I sit down under a tree and when I wake up I find out it's been weeks." Zagreus' voice is low, almost ashamed, and gods, Hypnos has heard this tone of voice from him before and had never really been able to grasp what it was, until now.

"I guess that's to be expected, since you've never been trained to wield your actual powers. Have you?"

"No... I didn't really have any powers? Unless you consider the bloodstones a power, which I guess it is? Was, I mean."

Yeah, Hypnos didn't miss that tone of voice one bit; the one where Zagreus sounds like he thinks of himself as dumb, or useless, or simply less.

"Okay, so you've got new powers and no idea how to test them. I can help with that!" Hypnos offers, afraid of looking like a fool but unable to sit there and let Zagreus think bad things about himself.

"Uhm, really?"

"Of course!"

"But how are you gonna find the time?"

Hypnos tilts his head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you have work to do? I doubt my father will let you leave just so you can teach me not to suck."

Oh.

"Ooooh. So... fun fact."

"...Yes?"

"I'm... not... in the House... anymore?" Hypnos says, helpless to keep the rising tone from his voice, the way he sounds so uncertain even though he's sure of his choice.

"...What?"

"I left. I left my job at the House of Hades. I left the House itself too." He gestures at his clothes, where the House symbol used to be.

He destroyed the skull clasp too, though that wasn't as much a symbol as it was a reminder of Hypnos' choices in the past, of pledging himself to the House and to Hades. He made it himself, so he destroyed it himself.

Zagreus' eyes flit between Hypnos' face and mid section, there and back again, jaw slack in surprise.

"Wh— why? What happened?"

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He sounds incredulous and worried, and Hypnos appreciates the worry even as he knows there's nothing to worry about.

"Well, after you left, things got... worse. Everyone was living on edge, angry at the slightest provocation, anxious and overworked and unable to hold any decent conversations." Hypnos stops, looks at Zagreus with what he knows is a sad expression. "Everyone was grieving, even when no one wanted to admit that you were gone for good."

The flash of guilt on Zagreus' face doesn't bring Hypnos any satisfaction.

"I just... I couldn't stay, Hypnos. I had to get away, one way or another."

"I know. I get it." And he does. He truly does. "So the mood wasn't good, and then I had a fight with Thanatos and it just... it was the culmination of everything, y'know?"

"You fought with Than?"

"Oh yeah. In the middle of the hall, in front of everyone," Hypnos says, smiling at the recent memory, even as a wave of anger runs through him.

"Blood and darkness, I'm sorry I missed it."

"What, really?"

"Yeah. I've always wondered how you could stand Than being bitchy without punching him once a day."

"Oh, well... I'd rather not hurt him, as annoying as he can be."

"Hurt him?"

"Uh, yeah."

Zagreus' eyes are curious as he stares. "What do you mean, 'hurt him'?"

Hypnos shrugs. "What do you mean, 'what do you mean'?"

Hurting someone, Zag! I don't wanna do it!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean— you mean you know how to fight?"

"Yeah?"

"Since when?"

"Since I was little, of course."

Zagreus gapes like a fish out of water, opening and closing his mouth. Then, "But you never trained with us?"

"I didn't want to. It was too dangerous. Mom— Mother trained me separately, but it was my choice."

Zagreus squirms, moving across the grass while still sitting, leaning in closer. "Hypnos, are you telling me you're more powerful than Than?"

"Ah... yeah?"

Zagreus' smile tells exactly what he thinks of this. Hypnos breathes a silent sigh of relief.

"I can't believe I'm only finding out about this now. You and I should train together, sometime."

"I don't wanna hu—"

"You don't wanna hurt me, I get it. But aren't you tired of being idle? How long has it been since you stretched those wings? Those powers of yours?"

"A while..."

"So we should train together, and that way you can start helping me figure my shit out. How does that sound?"

Hypnos contemplates this for a moment. He doesn't really enjoy fighting, but Zagreus is right, it *has* been a while since he let his powers loose. And training is not as serious as a fight, so no one gets hurt—permanently, that is.

"Alright, we can do that."

He gets the most brilliant grin in response.

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“Now?” Zagreus asks, eager as always.

“What, right now?”

“Do you have someplace to be?”

No. No, he doesn’t. People will have to pry him away from Zagreus with divine weapons, first.

“No.”

“Then no time like the present, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay. Should we do it here?” Zagreus looks around, confusion on his face. “Where are we, anyway?”

Oh.

“Uhm... my domain.”

Zagreus looks at him with that *look* again, that one that Hypnos can’t decipher, but that makes him feel good to be under.

He wants to be embarrassed about it, about showing Zagreus something so personal, such an intimate part of who he is, but... he’s just too tired to care. Too tired and too happy at the same time. Well, he’s always wanted Zagreus to come here, right?

No time like the present.

He spreads his arms wide. “Welcome to the House of Hypnos, and thanks for sleeping.”

Zagreus chuckles, taking everything in with curiosity shining on his face. He spins around, makes a show of looking at the trees and the sky and the ground.

Hypnos tries not to squirm.

Zagreus takes a few steps away from him, walking a little to the side, something shifting in his expression.

“Hypnos...”

“..Yes?”

“You have a field of poppies?”

Hypnos blinks, unsure of where this is going. It’s... pretty clear he has a field of poppies. They’re smack down in the middle of it.

“Yes?”

Zagreus looks at him, then at the field, then back at him. He gives Hypnos a small smile, and if Hypnos didn’t know any better, he would call that smile *shy*, except that Zagreus is never shy. He might be hesitant, or ashamed, or tired. But never shy.

“Hm. Okay,” Zagreus says, refusing to elaborate.

“..Okay.”

The silence threatens to stretch into awkward territory, so Hypnos beckons Zagreus closer.

“Come here. You can’t go around all wet like that.”

Zagreus steps toward him, amusement on his face. “I can’t actually get sick, you know,” he says, patting his clothes down and sending gold droplets toward the ground.

“Is that what you thought about frostbite, too?”

“Hey! I didn’t even know it existed!”

“Mhmm.”

“I didn’t!”

“Better safe than sorry.” Hypnos reaches out to touch him on the arm, but stops. “You’re not going to explode if I use chthonic energy on you, right?”

“I don’t think so? I have chthonic energy of my own, now, and nothing has exploded so far.”

“You’ve always had chthonic energy.”

“Barely, and it wasn’t even my own.”

“Semantics,” Hypnos says, sighing. He bites his lips, doubtful, but Zagreus apparently isn’t having any of it.

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He grabs Hypnos' hand and places it on his chest.

"Just do it. If I explode, you can help me piece my body back together."

"I'd rather not see you in pieces, thank you very much," he answers. "Though I admit I'm curious how you're going to react."

Then he dries Zagreus up using the least amount of energy possible for it.

A second of stillness, then Hypnos breathes a sigh of relief as nothing happens.

"See? Still intact," Zagreus says.

"Well, excuse me if I don't want to see you die any time soon, no matter if you can come back." Hypnos' voice is harsher than he wants it to be, and he regrets it immediately when Zagreus' face falls.

"Sorry," Zagreus says. "I'm still having a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that people think I'm gone."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm still a little mad at you, but it's not my intention to be rude like that."

"You can be rude all you want. I deserve it."

"Maybe a little bit."

Zagreus mostly deserves good things, actually, but Hypnos can't bring himself to say it.

"Alright, c'mon then. Let's find a place devoid of mortals and test some powers out," Hypnos says, shifting his form to the usual one, sending his extra appendages to the background.

He absently extends a hand to Zagreus and startles when he takes it, skin finally warm under Hypnos' touch.

He teleports them back to the mortal realm before Zagreus can see the blush on his face.



Hypnos is the most beautiful thing Zagreus has ever seen in his cursed existence.

There isn't a moment that he doesn't feel extremely grateful to Chaos for giving him a new life, but he feels especially grateful at moments like this, when his new vision allows him to see things he didn't even know were possible.

Like the feathers made entirely out of energy that swim on Hypnos' back, even with his physical wings hidden from sight; or the shimmer in his eyes, golden and orange and other hues that Zagreus has no name for; or the way his skin stretches and glimmers when he talks or laughs or cries, lavender giving way to light blue and back again, tiny pinpricks of light dancing on his cheeks.

Or the way the air shimmers and bends around him, like Hypnos is so much that physical planes can barely contain him. Like he's ready to burst at any moment, ready to release the energy Zagreus can feel emanating from him, such raw power that it makes the fine hairs on his arm stand up.

"Are you paying attention?" Hypnos asks, snapping Zagreus out of his thoughts.

"Of course I am!"

Hypnos levels him with a stare that says exactly how much he believes that. "Zag, are you getting tired again?"

Well... "A little bit?"

"We can do this later—"

"No no no, I can do this! Just... explain again?"

They're standing in the middle of the same field where

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Zagreus got frustrated and started punching random rocks. It's a pretty place, if a little barren. He thinks he might have seen some mortals earlier, but Hypnos has reassured him that he's put a little barrier around, so no one will see them.

"Okay, so," Hypnos begins again, hovering a little bit in the air, "you can feel the energy when you grant the wishes, but you can't control it beyond that?"

"Yeah. It helps me with the little things, like moving faster and keeping warm, but anything more than that is a chore. Sometimes it's even painful."

"Well, we usually have a core of energy inside. I guess it feels like... hm... like a ball of something warm?"

"Okay, yeah, I can feel it. Kinda. But when I try to access it, it's like there's nothing there. Like I've used it up already."

Hypnos looks at him, contemplatively. He floats closer to Zagreus, then drops down on the ground.

Zagreus stares. "You're taller than me?"

Hypnos blinks at him, smiling, looking a little bit incredulous. "Yeah? I've always been." Then he suddenly looks uncertain, like he's said or done something he shouldn't. "Is that bad? Are you mad that I'm taller?"

Zagreus hates that look on his face. "Nah, it's not bad at all. It's just an observation."

It's kinda hot, actually.

Holy shit, Zagreus, get a grip.

Hypnos blushes a little bit, like he's unused to compliments, no matter how tame they are.

And maybe he is. It's not like Zagreus didn't notice the way Hypnos was treated back at the House, the way immortals and shades alike barely paid him any mind. And Hypnos just never

acted out, no matter how upset he must have been.

"Okay, let's continue," Hypnos says, approaching Zagreus and extending out his two physical hands toward Zagreus' face. Zagreus can't help but stare at the other pair of hands too, wondering how they would feel on his skin, if the ripple of energy running across them would translate to a shock, or maybe a tingle.

"I'm going to hold on to you while you try and channel your energy, and we'll see if I can spot where it's going. Okay?"

"Alright," he answers, distracted by the pair of intangible eyes watching him from behind Hypnos' physical vessel.

Hypnos touches Zagreus' face, hands cradling his cheeks and around his eyes. His touch is gentle and warm, wings fluttering behind him, both pairs of eyes paying very close attention to him.

It would be enough to shatter his concentration, if he weren't so frustrated with the whole energy thing already. He needs to get a grip and be grateful that Hypnos has offered to help at all.

"Okay, whenever you want," Hypnos whispers, as if he doesn't want to break the stillness around them.

Zagreus closes his eyes, hoping it might help with his concentration, but he still can see the shimmer of Hypnos' true form hovering in some other plane, and yet so, so close.

If he reaches out, would he touch it?

"Zag?"

"Sorry, sorry. Doing it now!"

He reaches out for his power like he always does, looking deep into his soul for the bright core spinning inside. And, like always, it's almost empty. Just the motion of looking inside has

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already left him exhausted *again*.

He sighs, dejected, opening his eyes to find Hypnos watching him.

"Did you feel anything?" Zagreus asks, hoping Hypnos has an answer. He's so tired of feeling like this.

"A little bit, yes. As soon as you closed your eyes, most of the energy you had burst out of you, which speaks of a lack of control, but..." Hypnos brings one of his hands to himself, touching a fingertip to his bottom lip, "there wasn't much energy there to begin with, which is the strangest part."

"Why is that?" Zagreus asks, choosing not to remind Hypnos that his other hand is still on Zagreus' face.

"I can feel the power buzzing around you. It's so loud, it's like you're a beehive. That much power shouldn't just disappear when you try to touch it. I wonder where it's going."

Hypnos' little hair wings flutter as he thinks, one physical and the other there but not. Again, Zagreus wonders if he could touch them both at the same time. He wants to ask, but that would be rude. Right?

"Why do you only show one of the little wings?" he asks anyway, unable to stop his mouth from forming the words.

Hypnos looks at him in confusion for a moment, and Zagreus has to control himself not to slap a hand over his traitorous mouth. It would look silly, but most importantly, it would dislodge the hand that Hypnos hasn't retracted yet.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you have both of them, but only one of them shows, usually. For a long time I thought you only had one, but I can see the other there, so... why do you only keep one?"

Hypnos' facial expression morphing from confusion to

shock is fascinating to watch.

"What did you say?" he asks, hushed, like Zagreus just told him the biggest secret in the universe.

"Uhm... why do you keep only—"

"No no, the other thing!" Hypnos touches the energy wing on the left side of his head. "You can see it? Right now?"

"...Yeah?"

Hypnos doesn't answer, but his mouth opens in surprise. He blinks, looking over Zagreus with a glint in his eyes, as if he's finally realizing something.

Hypnos' wings flutter, and Zagreus wonders if he could tell Hypnos' moods by the way he moves his wings. Maybe he could learn, with some practice.

Hypnos grabs Zagreus' face and brings it close to his own. "Zag, do you See?"

"What?"

Hypnos shakes him a little bit. "You said you saw my wing just now!"

"Well, yeah, I have eyes!"

"No, Zag!"

"No', what?"

"Do you see my other wings?" Hypnos asks in that tone that says he already knows the answer, he just needs clear confirmation.

"Yup."

"All of them?"

"Yup?"

"All the time?"

"...Yup?"

Hypnos stares at him for one second that seems to stretch

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longer than it should. Then he laughs.

He doesn't let go of Zagreus, so he gets to see Hypnos laughing from very close, which should be weird. But it really, really isn't.

There are little stars on Hypnos' cheeks, and they twinkle when he laughs. From the corner of his vision, Zagreus can see the wings fluttering again, because apparently Hypnos is one of those people that laugh with his whole being, with physical and metaphysical parts.

His golden eyes are bright like the sun when they fix themselves on him again.

"I get it, now! I know what's going on! Zag, you can See!"

"Yes, we've established that."

"No, you don't get it!" He lets go of Zagreus and spreads his arms, wings following the movement.

Zagreus tries not to show on his face what he thinks of Hypnos suddenly being way too far from him.

"Do you see them? My wings?" Hypnos asks, the wings flapping behind him as if trying to take off.

"Yeah."

"And the other pair of arms?"

"Yeah?"

"The eyes, too?"

"Uh, yeah."

"And you've been able to see them all this time?"

"You mean, since you've found me hours and hours ago? Yeah."

"Okay, so I'm right." He nods to himself. "Zag, you can see through planes."

Zagreus frowns. "That— are you sure?"

"Of course. These parts of me you're seeing right now are not in the physical plane. I'm hiding them. You shouldn't be able to see any of it."

And yet, there they are.

He thinks back to all the other weird little details he's been seeing since he left the Underworld. How things shimmer a little too much sometimes; how some animals seem to stare deep into his soul with an intelligence that maybe shouldn't be there, normally; how he sees grooves on rocks and footprints on the earth that seem to not quite be there; how some rivers flow in ways that should be impossible.

Oh.

"Oh."

Hypnos giggles, so cute that Zagreus is momentarily distracted. Again.

Gods, Hypnos is so distracting. He's always been, to some degree, but now even more. Zagreus is unsure how much longer he can keep his inopportune feelings to himself.

"You've been Seeing all this time, no wonder you're always exhausted. You're constantly using your energy, leaking it everywhere." Hypnos bites his lips. "Sorry, I should have realized it sooner, when I felt the power emanating from you."

"You don't need to apologize, I'm the one who should have known better. I thought... I thought it was just a side effect of being this new me, y'know. It didn't occur to me that I was constantly using my reserves."

He waits for the shame, for the self-deprecating thoughts, and they do come, of course; but they do it slowly, weakly, nothing compared to what it would have been like, months ago.

Apparently, admitting his failings in front of Hypnos is not

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that bad.

“So all this time I’ve just been using too much energy all the damn time, huh? Yeah, that makes sense, but I’d like it to stop now.”

“I can help you with that. You just need to train your control. Now that you know the problem, the solution should be easier to obtain.”

“And how do I do that?”

“By meditating!”

Oh no. No way.

“No way, that’s so boring!”

“But it’s good for you! And it will help you control your powers!”

“But it’s very, very boring, and I suck at it.”

“Says who?”

“Me; I’m saying it. Achilles tried to teach me how to meditate many times. It never stuck.”

“Okay, but you were much younger and much more impatient.”

“The only thing that’s changed is my age.”

“Not true. I remember you when you were young, you know. You have more patience now, for sure.”

“Okay, sure. 1 is bigger than zero, but that doesn’t mean 1 is a big number, Hypnos.”

“That’s the dumbest analogy I’ve heard in a while, shut up.”

No matter how much he argues, Zagreus knows he’s going to lose. They exchange a few more barbs and at some point Hypnos pouts. Zagreus throws his hands up in the air, because, see, he knew he was going to lose.

He doesn’t even mind, really, because Hypnos smiles like he

won something better than just a dumb argument, and Zagreus is beginning to realize he will do stupid things for that smile.



They spend a whole week on meditative exercises, from breathing correctly to learning how to let his thoughts run without conscious interference, and by the end of that first week, Zagreus is exhausted but satisfied.

Progress is slow, of course, but some things are just slow when it comes to him. He just tries hard not to let it show how much it affects him, though he's not always successful.

“Sorry, I’m just kinda dumb.”

“Don’t even start, you are *not* dumb.”)



“Will I ever be able to shut the whole vision thing off completely?”

“I’m not sure. Some powers just simply stay active all the time, and the best you can do is control it as much as you can.”

“So I’ll always be able to See you, even if parts of you are in another plane?”

“Probably? Why?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it.”

“...Alright. Go to sleep, then.”

“Kay. You’ll be here when I wake up, right?”

“It’s adorable that you think you’re getting rid of me that easily.”

“Just making sure.”

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“What are all these dandelions for? I saw them when I found you, and they follow you everywhere.” Hypnos asks one day, a few weeks later.

They’re standing on the edge of a cliff, watching the sun go down, after a mostly successful meditation session.

Hypnos’ pointing at the yellow flowers dotting the landscape under and around them.

“I’m surprised it took you this long to ask.”

“I was waiting for you to tell me.”

“Oh, sorry. These little things have just... been following me around,” he answers, hoping his voice doesn’t give his feelings away.

“Following you?”

“Yeah. Sometimes they turn into those... erm... floofballs? And if I concentrate enough, I can hear things from them.”

Hypnos stops, lifting his head to stare at Zagreus. He looks incredulous.

“You can hear *things* from them?”

“...Yeah?” he answers, unsure if that’s the right thing to say.

Oh gods, has he done something wrong again?

“Zag. Zagreus. Zag Zag Zag.”

“That’s my name.”

“Yes, it is.” Hypnos’ voice is fond, exasperated, soft, all the things in between. It’s rapidly becoming his favorite thing to hear.

Hypnos floats closer to him. “So you have these dandelions following you around, and sometimes they tell you things, and

then... what?"

"Weeeell... I can hear wishes coming from them, and if I can, I grant them."

"You grant wishes."

"Yup."

"The dandelions whisper wishes to you, and you grant them."

"Yup."

Hypnos brings his hands up to his lips in prayer form, looking at Zagreus like he wants to slap him in the arm again.

"You know... you play the stupid buffoon really well, when you want to."

Zagreus winces. He turns away so Hypnos can't see his face. He doesn't know what expression he's wearing, but he feels the shame rising and tries to shove it back down.

It's not like he hasn't thought about it.

But it can't be.

It just can't.

Because if it is what he thinks it is, then he has many more responsibilities than he knows what to do with. Zagreus breaks everything he touches; he can't have this much power in his hands.

"Zag." Hypnos' voice is soft, and Zagreus can't help but think that Hypnos shouldn't waste his softness on him.

"It's just too much," he answers, voice breaking. He slaps a hand over his mouth.

"It's okay, we'll work on it."

"No, I mean— it's just too much, Hypnos. It's too much for me. I don't—"

I don't deserve it.

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He doesn't say it, but Hypnos seems to hear it anyway, because he floats closer until Zagreus can feel his warmth on his back. Hypnos lays his arms very gently on Zagreus' shoulders, leaning into him, touching his forehead to the back of Zagreus' head.

"Were you going to say you don't deserve it?"

"Tsk. How do you know?"

"I'm learning how to read you. You're not that undecipherable."

"I'm the epitome of undecipherable."

Hypnos' giggles, little puffs of warm air ruffling Zagreus' hair.

He wants to turn around and hold Hypnos close, and the urge is almost impossible to ignore, so he brings his hands together, almost in prayer, telling them to stay put and not ruin this.

"Zag. You deserve good things."

How does something that sounds so simple manage to shatter him so completely?

His knees shake, his body wanting to sit down and shut down. Hypnos seems to realize this, because he moves away from Zagreus' back and pulls him to the edge of the cliff, sitting down and bringing Zagreus down with him.

"So, you're a god who grants wishes, huh?" Hypnos asks, refusing to let the subject lie forgotten, and while that might have been annoying at some point, Zagreus is grateful that Hypnos doesn't let him wallow in his misery.

"No. I can't grant all of them. Some of them are... it's hard to explain, but it's like they're too simple? As if they won't make a difference, so they become suddenly unimportant, and the seed

carrying it just... vanishes.”

“You can only grant important wishes?”

“I think so?”

“So, like... wishes that change people? That change their lives?”

“Yeah, that’s what it feels like. I’ve followed up on some of the ones I’ve granted already, and the differences were, uh... they were big. *Really* big.”

Hypnos hums, sharp eyes focused on him. “God of Changes? God of *Change*? It would suit you.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Oh, my bad. God of Really Big Wishes That Change People’s Lives.”

Zagreus can’t help but laugh, feeling the darkness starting to recede from his vision. “It has a good ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely not.”

He doesn’t answer; how can he, when the job the Fates have thrown at him seems so big as to be insurmountable? He breathes in, breathes out, then repeats the process when it’s clear his lungs don’t want to obey.

Hypnos doesn’t rush him.

Hypnos never rushes him.

“I think the Fates chose the wrong person for the job.”

“I don’t think my sisters can predict every little thing, and I rather doubt they foresaw this.”

He looks at Hypnos in surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah. Few know this, but they’re not all-seeing, and definitely not all-powerful.” A smile. “I think you might have gotten them entirely by surprise this time.”

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"Huh. It's just... who am I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, who *am* I, to think I can change people's lives for the better? I'm just this dude."

"No. You're Zagreus," Hypnos answers promptly, in that tone of voice Zagreus is learning to adore.

"Well, yes. But I... I never wanted to be more than that, you know? I mean, at first I thought that if I was all powerful and important, father would—" he pauses, feeling his forehead scrunch into a horrible frown that he knows makes him look like Hades.

A deep breath. "I thought that if I was perfect, my father would love me, then. He was always going on and on about my place, my responsibilities, the family's legacy, blablabla. But no matter how much I tried, I could never get a word of praise from him. I couldn't be the perfect little son he wanted. So I gave up. I decided that being as unimportant as possible would be a good way to spit back on his face."

He runs a hand through his hair, eyes watering. "I don't think I know how to be anything else other than unremarkable."

The silence that comes after is surprisingly soft. Zagreus is starting to learn that things with Hypnos are always surprisingly soft, like the fluffy clouds that follow him around, or the pretty curls in his hair.

Hypnos sighs, resting an elbow on a knee, and his head on his hand. "I know my words won't help much, but you have never been unremarkable. I don't think you're even *capable* of being unremarkable, Zag."

Zagreus' smile is small, but he makes an effort for Hypnos.

"So what you're saying is that I suck at it like I suck at everything else?"

"That's not—" Hypnos starts, appalled.

Zagreus laughs then, a couple of tears spilling out as he scrunches his eyes shut. When he opens them again, Hypnos is giving him a look that's a mix between exasperated and fond, a little bit of teeth showing in his smile.

Oh, he missed that look so much.

He missed it being directed at him every time he got out of the pool, Hypnos waiting to make fun of him for whatever had killed him. Missed seeing it after having his usual spat with his father, when he would turn away from the desk and catch Hypnos' eyes from across the hall. Missed seeing it whenever he brought a bottle of contraband back into the House.

"I didn't know you had such a high opinion of me," he says, wanting to sound flippant, like it's a joke. It comes out sounding way too honest and raw instead, exposing a part of him he wasn't planning to.

Hypnos seems to catch on to his tone, eyes softening even more. "You never asked," he answers, just as honest and raw, a little bit of hurt coming through.

Zagreus winces, blushing in pure shame and unwilling to hide it from Hypnos. "I'm an asshole. I'm sorry. I spent so much time being miserable that I didn't look at anything else, or anyone else."

"That's okay."

"No, it's not."

"Yeah, it is. You were hurting, Zag. When we hurt, it's hard to concentrate on the good things. It's hard not to spread that hurt around, too."

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"You didn't do it, though."

"Hm?"

"You never spread your hurt around. You kept it inside, even when people might have deserved a verbal smackdown."

Hypnos stares at him, mouth slightly open in surprise. As if Zagreus paying attention to anything he did is something new.

Another pang of guilt hits him in the chest like a fist.

"I just—" Hypnos starts, falters, then, "I didn't want people to feel how I feel. No one deserves that."

"And that makes you stronger than me."

"Zag—"

"No, it does. You know I'm right. You took your pain and decided other people didn't need to feel it. I admire that. I— I went around being bratty and callous and careless because I was angry at everything, and I hurt other people in the process. People who didn't deserve any of it."

"Yes, and I internalized my pain so much that I let people walk all over me. I think you and I need to stop comparing ourselves to one another. Let's agree that we're both a little bit fucked up."

Zagreus chuckles, and the fist holding him down loosens up a little, his breath coming a little bit easier.

The sun is a sliver of light by now, painting the sky in pink and orange and blue. It's Zagreus' favorite time of the day.

Hypnos breaks the comfortable silence as the last rays of sun disappear over the horizon.

"I don't know if anyone has ever told you this, but... you're more than enough."

The words take a second to sink in, mainly because Zagreus had never expected Hypnos of all people to be the one to say

them. *To him.*

He turns his head towards Hypnos, knowing his own expression is one of complete shock. The first rays of moonlight—too faint for normal vision, but sharp to Zagreus' eyes—hit Hypnos just right, making his lavender skin look so light, it's almost white. It blends in with his hair and his single wing, like the whole of him has been carved from the same material. His golden eyes always seem like they have a fire from within, glowing ever so faintly, but right now they're brighter, and it has nothing to do with the moon.

"What?" It's the only thing he can think to say, and it's dumb, of course it is, because Zagreus always says dumb shit at the wrong time... but Hypnos' smile only widens, a slight blush on his cheeks.

"I said that you're more than enough," Hypnos repeats, shifting to get more comfortable. The ground beneath them is cold, but Hypnos doesn't seem to feel it. "I know... I mean, I understand that maybe someone has told you you're worthless so many times that they made you believe it"—Hypnos says *someone*, but Zagreus hears *Hades*—"but that's not true."

He takes a deep breath. "It's not true at all, because, let's be honest here for a second... you should know by now that your father is full of shit."

Zagreus knows he's gaping, caught completely by surprise by Hypnos—Hypnos!—saying something like that about the Lord of the Underworld, but... but there's also a tiny smile that's trying to curl in his mouth, and Zagreus feels the laugh trying to bubble out of him.

Hypnos notices the shift in his expression and grins, seeming... relieved? He seems relieved, as if he had been

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worrying about his words, or maybe Zagreus' reaction to them.

As if Zagreus would ever disagree with insulting Hades in any way, shape or form.

Zagreus chuckles, relieving some of the tension in his muscles. "Sorry, sorry, I know we're talking about something serious here. I just can't believe you said that about my father! That's amazing, Hypnos, you just made my night." He continues chuckling for a few more seconds, feeling the accumulated stress of the last weeks—months, even—begin to wash away from him.

He almost wants to feel silly, embarrassed to be here laughing about some simple words, but the self-admonishment is easy to brush away this time.

(It's always surprisingly easy to make fun of Hades, and at some point in the past Zagreus may have regretted being so callous about family, but now that the term family has been muddled and reshaped and transformed into something new, Zagreus allows himself to feel only a perverse sense of glee from the mockery.)

He composes himself again and turns back to Hypnos, and is caught off guard by the look he's receiving. Hypnos is still smiling, his eyes lidded, expression content. Like he's enjoying watching Zagreus. Like he's pleased that he made him laugh.

No one looks at Zagreus that way.

His stomach tightens, a sudden wave of self-consciousness that threatens to turn him into a stuttering mess. His cheeks are getting warmer, and he can only hope that Hypnos won't notice it in the dark of the night.

He clears his throat. "So, you were saying...?"

"I was saying you're more than enough," Hypnos says for the

third time that night. He shifts again, turning toward Zagreus, and Zagreus can do nothing but follow his movements, with his eyes and with his body, angling himself toward Hypnos too.

“I suppose you haven't heard that a lot, huh? I get it; I know how Hades is, and I know how our mother can be, when she doesn't realize how cruel her silence is. I guess I just wanted to tell you something that I might have wanted to hear at some point. Sometimes it's good, right, to hear that you're appreciated?”

Zagreus blinks. Then blinks again. Hypnos looks shy all of a sudden, confidence waning, but his gaze is steady. Something rushes up Zagreus' throat, almost suffocating in its intensity. His eyes burn.

He avoids Hypnos' eyes and stares at the ground for a second.

He understands what Hypnos is trying to say, and some part of Zagreus understands that it's good for him to hear it, but most of him is just incredibly overwhelmed and he can feel four golden eyes on him and if Hypnos doesn't stop staring Zagreus might do something stupid like start crying or maybe kiss him and by the gods that would be incredibly embarrassing—

A hand on his hair snaps him out of his thoughts.

Zagreus blinks at his own hands, at the half-moon indentations and the little pinpricks of black blood. His nails are bloody too. (He didn't even notice what he was doing, and it's disconcerting to have his body act without his say so.)

“Hey, Zag.”

The voice is soft and undemanding and makes Zagreus want to look up, even though he's afraid of what he's going to see on Hypnos' face. The hand on his hair is light, moving slowly, as

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though afraid to spook him.

He looks up.

Hypnos' face is closer, his whole body curved forward so that he can see Zagreus' face better. Zagreus braces himself for the pity and the irritation that usually swim in people's eyes when he checks out of a situation... but they're not there. Hypnos looks concerned, but also understanding, a testament of the time they've spent together lately, getting to know each other again.

He smiles when Zagreus meets his eyes again.

"Hi," he says, hand still in Zagreus' hair.

Zagreus feels the first tear falling, unable to stop his body from reacting. His mind is a jumble of half-formed thoughts and he can't seem to find the reason for *why* he's crying. It's not like Hypnos said anything groundbreaking, right? It's something very simple, that anyone who ever cared about him could have said to him at any point in his life. But they didn't.

Oh.

No one has ever told him he's enough. No one.

Until now.

Hypnos' other hand comes up to his cheek and wipes something away, and Zagreus realizes he's full on crying now. The shame seems to explode from his chest and cover his whole body with it, and suddenly he's too warm and too cold and the tears keep coming. Part of him doesn't even want to stop crying, because at least the emotions in his chest seem to be getting a little looser.

"Hey, it's okay. Come here." Hypnos pulls him gently, right into his arms, and Zagreus goes oh so willingly.

It's warm, almost toasty, probably due to the blanket. But

most of all, it's soft. Soft and gentle and good in a way that few things have been in Zagreus' life so far. Hypnos smells like clouds and feathers and moonlight, with a sweet undertone that must be the poppies.

The poppies Zagreus didn't even know existed until a few weeks ago.

(The poppies that he dreams about, sometimes, when he wants something comfortable to follow him into slumber.)

Hypnos strokes his hair while Zagreus' cries on his shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're still here," Hypnos whispers, and the way he says *here* makes it clear what he means. "The world would have been a lesser place without you."

And that's two people, now. Two people who are apparently happy that Zagreus exists at all, and the concept is so unfamiliar to him, that he can only cry more in response.

(Something loosens up inside him, and something else falls into place.)

He stays in Hypnos' embrace for a few minutes more, even after his tears have dried, intending on squeezing out every second he can get away with staying right here, in this pair of arms.

Oh, wait. In *these* pairs of arms, because he can sense the other pair embracing him too.

After a while, he leans back from Hypnos' arms, trying to put a little distance between them, embarrassed by the way his face feels swollen and raw, eyes still stinging a little.

He can't help but send Hypnos a smile, though, making sure to put all his silent gratitude into it. He's a little unwilling to open his mouth, because he doesn't know what may come out.

Hypnos smiles back, eyes half mast in contentment.

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Zagreus wishes he were a painter, to immortalize this moment forever, to capture the way Hypnos' eyes travel over his face, like he's drinking Zagreus in for the first time; or maybe capture the way the wind ruffles Hypnos' hair, curls swaying gently, little wing flapping absently in the breeze; or capture the way his other pair of eyes stare at him, unblinking, like they can't bother to blink when they can watch him instead.

He wishes he could capture the way Hypnos glows under the sun, like he was made to soak up sunlight and shine it back out into the world.

"You're so beautiful."

See? *See?* This is exactly why he tries to stay silent in these moments; because his mouth likes to betray him in the worst ways possible.

Skelly—Skelly, of all people!—told him once that his brain to mouth filter is broken, and Zagreus had disagreed at the time, but by the gods, Skelly was right.

Hypnos' reaction is slow, almost like he can't believe what he heard. His eyes widen slightly at first, then all the way, as a fierce blush takes over his whole face. He blushes as if he's made of gold, and Zagreus has to bite his tongue to not spout something even more embarrassing.

There's a few seconds of awkward silence, but... what is it that mortals say? In for a coin, in for the whole sack?

"I mean it, by the way."

Hypnos covers his face with his hands, but he peeks at Zagreus from between his fingers.

"I think you're beautiful," he repeats, knowing his face is burning too, but he makes sure to say his words with

confidence. "I've always thought you were beautiful, but now even more so."

"...You've said that before, you know."

"Huh? When?"

"When I found you in the snow and brought you into my domain. You woke up for a few seconds, told me I had wings and all." Hypnos giggles. "Then you said *you're beautiful* and passed out again. I thought— I thought you were half-dreaming or something."

"Oh gods," Zagreus says, running a hand through his face, though he can't help but grin at himself, at this whole situation. "Nah, I was just telling it like I see it."

Hypnos doesn't seem to know what to say to that. He blinks rapidly, looking Zagreus up and down like he can't quite believe he's real. He slowly lowers his hands from his face, still flushed golden and so, so pretty Zagreus wants to kiss him.

In for a coin...

"I want to kiss you."

Hypnos groans, slapping his hands back on his face. "You can't just say things like that!"

"Too bad, I just did!"

"Fine, come kiss me then!"

"Fine, I will!" Wait, what? "Wait— what?"

Hypnos laughs at him, his face a brilliant shade of gold, stars dancing over his cheeks like there's a whole galaxy under his skin.

"I said, come kiss me then!"

Zagreus' blinks, eyes wide in astonishment and awe. He probably looks stupid right now, but Hypnos is still looking at him like he's worth the trouble, and Zagreus has seen that look

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on Hypnos' face before.

Many times before.

He had just never connected the dots.

Gods, he's stupid.

He grabs one of Hypnos' arms and gently tugs at him, silently asking him to come a little bit closer. There's not much distance left between them, so when Hypnos leans toward him, they're basically flush to one another already.

Zagreus takes a moment to Look, to admire the parts that Hypnos doesn't show to other people, to enjoy the fluttering of his wings in that particular way that means Hypnos is very pleased.

There are stars under Hypnos' skin, and the air dances around him like it wants to keep touching him forever, and he looks at Zagreus like he's glad that Zagreus is alive.

Zagreus is also so, so glad that he's still alive. And that he gets to have this.

He grabs Hypnos by the face and brings him in.



No paint in the world would ever be able to capture this.



The days pass in a slow, sluggish pace, getting colder and colder. Greece is entering what would be its actual winter, if the nation still had season cycles at all.

"I could barely keep myself warm enough in lesser-winter, how am I supposed to do that in great-winter?"

Hypnos laughs at his silly nomenclature, the way Zagreus knew he would.

“I can teach you how to keep the warmth up for longer, don’t worry! You’re already getting pretty good at it.”

“Or you can kiss me. Same thing.”

“Tempting, but I can’t kiss you 24/7, Zag.”

“How do you know? You haven’t even tried it.”

He scores another laugh, a little bit of a giggle thrown in as well.

Zagreus smiles, satisfied that he’s the one who makes Hypnos laugh like that; like the world is not as heavy as it once was.

would kissing for the whole day actually keep you warm? Chaos asks, butting into the conversation.

Hypnos groans, embarrassed. “No, no it wouldn’t. You shouldn’t listen to Zagreus, Gran Chaos. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“How dare you, I’m the epitome of knowing what I’m talking about.”

“That barely made any sense. I think it’s time for someone to go to sleep.”

“What? No! I’m still super awak—” A yawn interrupts him, and all he can do is roll his eyes at himself.

He bundles himself up in Hypnos’ blanket, burying his nose on the soft fabric and inhaling the scent of poppies. Hypnos reaches for him, controlling the blanket to bring Zagreus’ closer to him.

Zagreus lays his head on Hypnos’ lap, his favorite place in the world.

He closes his eyes and waits for sleep to take him. He doesn’t

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get exhausted as often anymore, but sometimes it still gets him by surprise.

But he's getting better at all the god stuff, thanks to Hypnos' gentle guidance and good-natured ribbing; and Chaos' random help, when they're in the mood for it.

He's slowly slipping away when he feels something other than fingers in his hair.

"Whatcha doing?" he asks, almost not awake anymore.

"Putting a poppy in your hair."

"Hmm, 'kay."

it looks very appropriate. I approve

"That's great," he murmurs.

sleep now. my grandchild is going to teach me how to draw, and we need you to be still if we are to use you for the observation exercises

"Shhh, don't tell him just yet! It's a surprise!"

ah, I see. forget what I said, zagreus

"...sure..." he doesn't even know what they're talking about anymore, but that's okay.

He falls asleep warm and comfortable and safe, feeling the kiss of a good dream settle in his mind.



It feels like home.

Razia

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